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The New Criterion

September 1988

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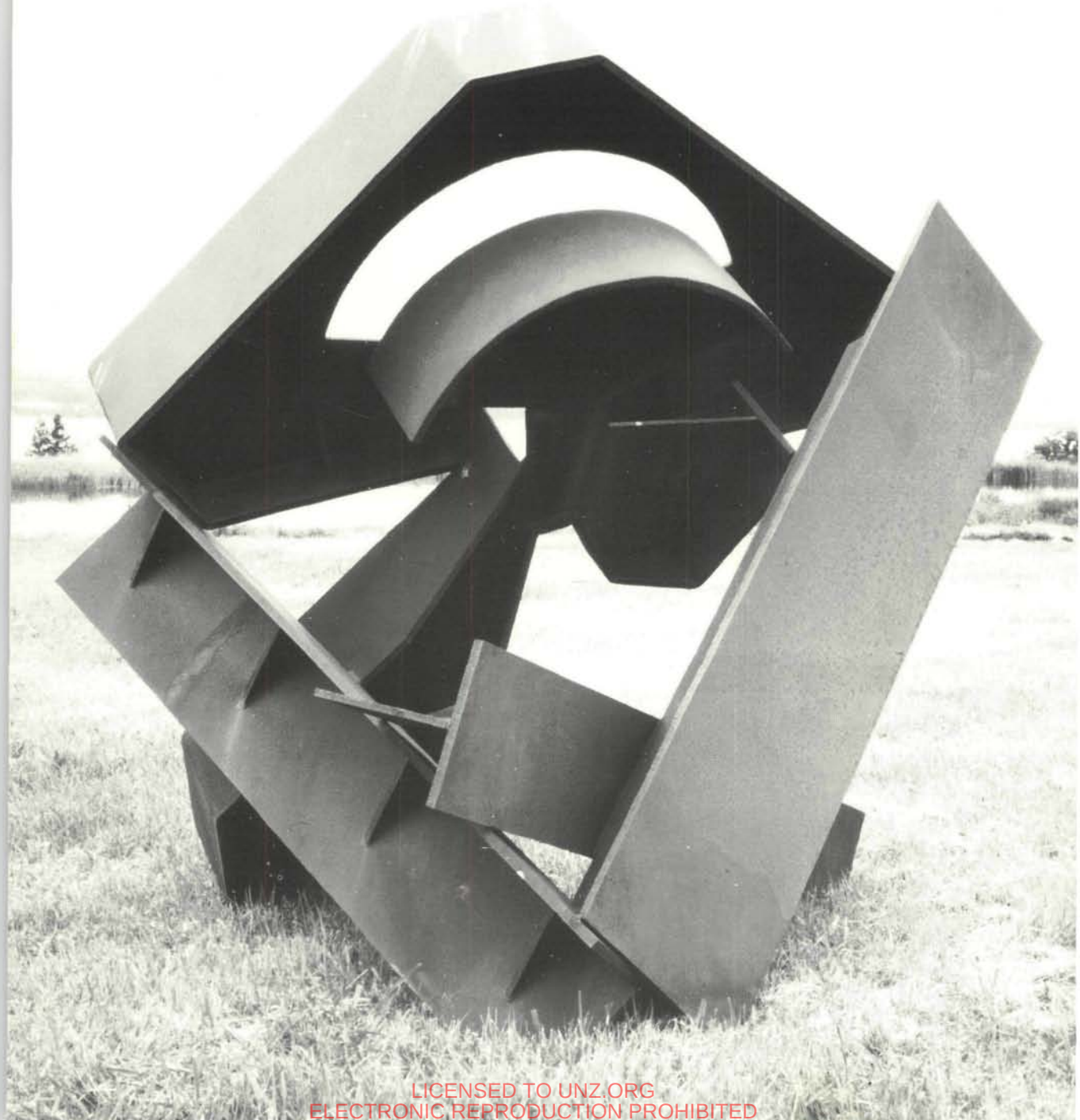

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The New Criterion *September 1988*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Donna Rifkind*
Office Manager *Maria Garvey*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer's new book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has just been published by Graywolf Press.

Eric Gibson writes regularly on art for *The New Criterion* and *Studio International.*

David Gurewich is the author of *Travels with Dubinsky and Clive* (Viking).

Jeffrey Harrison's book of poems, *The Singing Underneath,* was recently published by Dutton.

Mark Helprin's essay in this issue is adapted from his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1988* (copyright © 1988 by Mark Helprin), to be published by Houghton Mifflin in October. His last book was *Winter's Tale* (Harcourt).

Roger Kimball wrote on postmodern architecture for the June issue of *The New Criterion.*

Samuel Lipman is the artistic director of the Waterloo Music Festival and School in New Jersey. This article is based on a speech given to the annual meeting of Chorus America in Washington, D.C., this past June.

James Lord is the author of *Giacometti: A Biography* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* will be published next month by North Point Press.

Eva Resnikova writes regularly on dance for *The New York Observer* and *The New Criterion.*

Deborah Solomon is the author of *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (Simon & Schuster).

Elizabeth Spires's third collection of poetry will be published early next year by Viking.

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John McClellan, 1908-1986, *Panic,* 1937, lithograph, ed. of 40, 11 7/8 x 17 3/4 inches

John McClellan

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Rehabilitating the Russian avant-garde

by Hilton Kramer

In 1967, in the course of a visit to Moscow, I was entertained one evening in the apartment of a young man who seemed to know a lot about the life of art in the Soviet Union at that time. He may also have been some sort of dealer, though it was difficult for an outsider like myself to ascertain very precisely what his situation was. He seemed to live well but to have no official position; he seemed to enjoy special privileges but to have no public claim to them—a combination of circumstances guaranteed to arouse suspicion. I was in the Soviet Union on assignment for *The New York Times* to write about Soviet art on the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, and I had been told that the young man in question could put me in touch with certain artists and with the people who collected their work.

In those days there was much talk and excitement about the kind of art that in the West was often called "underground" but which in the Soviet Union was generally referred to, by its friends anyway, as "unofficial"—art of a more or less modernist character that was produced outside the official channels of the cultural bureaucracy and did not meet its political criteria. (Khrushchev and the apparatchiks of the Artists Union had other, less polite ways of referring to it.) During my visits to Moscow and Leningrad I got to see a fair amount of this art, and I did indeed meet some of the people who collected it. Among them was a young Soviet physicist who was one of the guests invited to meet with me that evening in Moscow.

He arrived carrying a little round cake he had bought in a bakery, and when this cake was served with the tea and the inevitable vodka and brandy and other accompaniments, I commented on the striking design of the cake's icing. The design was wholly abstract, consisting of a number of intertwining circles and arcs that reminded me of some of the early constructions of Alexander Rodchenko. When I pointed out this resemblance, I was told that this cake was called a "Sputnik cake," named in honor of the Soviet Union's first venture into space ten years earlier. The physicist who had brought the cake suddenly became very animated by my observation, and in the Russian manner that I was already familiar with, he immediately stood to propose a toast. "Let us drink to a time," he said, holding his glass aloft, "when we shall once again have our art in the museums instead of the bakeries."

It was a poignant moment. My host that evening might be dealing in modernist art on the black market, but to do so was a risky business that could easily have landed him—or someone else—in the Gulag. As for the legendary Rodchenko, he was of course one of the most accomplished of the many remarkable artists who created the Russian avant-garde in the years just before and after the Revolution, and in 1967 his work, like theirs, was still banned from public exhibi-

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tion. With the right connections you could see a good many of these modernist works in the so-called "reserves" of the Russian museums—and by that time I already had—but there was nothing to see in public. The official Soviet line on art was still mired in the repulsive doctrines of Socialist Realism, which Stalin had made mandatory in the early 1930s. Stalin had been dead for fourteen years, but all public deviations from the political kitsch of Socialist Realism—and even, for that matter, certain private ones—were still extremely hazardous. Yet there was, all the same, a good deal of "underground" artistic activity, and the hope persisted that ways might be found to bring this unofficial art into public view.

At that particular moment—I am speaking of June 1967—much seemed to depend on the debate that was said to be raging in the councils of the Artists Union and in the Kremlin itself over the composition of the mammoth exhibition of fifty years of Soviet art that was being planned to mark the half-century anniversary of the Revolution in the fall. Would the fiftieth-anniversary exhibition be the occasion on which the Russian avant-garde would at long last be rehabilitated? That was the burning question, but all the hopes that were riding on that possibility were quickly dashed. The great collections of modernist works remained sequestered in the museum "reserves"—available to the privileged few but not to the public at large—and modernism itself was still officially forbidden.

The artist most conspicuously honored during my visit to Moscow was not a Russian modernist but a quite different figure—the American painter and illustrator Rockwell Kent, who had long been a devout worshipper at the altar of Stalinism and was still an abject follower of the Kremlin line in the post-Stalinist era. On the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday Kent was welcomed to the Kremlin with a good deal of pomp and ceremony and given some sort of prestigious decoration—could it have been the Lenin Prize? I attended these lugubrious festivities, which included many long speeches (dutifully translated for me by my official interpreter), and Kent responded by vigorously denouncing the United States and praising the "progressive" vision and generosity of the Soviet Union. It was quite a spectacle, and when it was over, I felt it unlikely that the commissars who had succeeded in mounting it with so much fanfare at that particular moment would be obliged to concede much to the modernists on so solemn an occasion as the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution.

These and many other memories of my trip to the Soviet Union that year—the poet I met who was secretly translating Wallace Stevens, the underground painter who was so audacious and high-spirited in his hospitality to Western visitors (and who perished two years later in a mysterious fire in his studio), the students who offered me pot (much better than American pot, they claimed) and showered me with questions about Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and James Baldwin—these memories have been much on my mind since I went down to Washington earlier this summer to see the exhibition called "Russian and Soviet Paintings 1900-1930," which has come to the Hirshhorn Museum from the Soviet Union.[1] Drawn from the collections of two state museums—the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Russian museum in Leningrad—the exhibition contains some paintings that were new to me, but many others among its nearly one hundred pictures I had seen before either on that visit to the Soviet

1 "Russian and Soviet Paintings 1900-1930: Selections from the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, and the State Museum, Leningrad" opened at the Hirshhorn Museum on July 12 and remains on view through September 25. No curator is listed as having directed the exhibition. The incomplete catalogue is to be followed by a supplement that lists—and presumably reproduces—the twenty-one paintings that were added to the exhibition after the original catalogue went to press. Among the added pictures, by the way, is Isaak I. Brodsky's famous portrait of *Lenin in Smolnyi* (1930).

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Union in 1967 or in the great "Paris-Moscow" exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris in 1979. In recent decades there have been a good many exhibitions of modern Russian art on this side of the Iron Curtain, and the show at the Hirshhorn Museum cannot, in truth, be said to be one of the best of them. The whole effort has been very badly compromised by the inclusion of so many examples of the kind of Socialist Realist boilerplate that was produced on demand under Stalin. There was actually a much better show at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1980—the exhibition of "The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910-1930," which Maurice Tuchman and Stephanie Barron had originally organized at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art earlier that year. Certainly the show that has now been cobbled together to serve (I suppose) the interests of *glasnost*—and so hastily that many of its pictures are neither listed nor reproduced in the catalogue—doesn't compare in quality or scope or in its scholarship, either, with the Los Angeles show or the "Paris-Moscow" exhibition or the exhibition devoted to the George Costakis Collection at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1981.

What makes this exhibition different from the others, however, is its timing and the shift in official Soviet policy it is claimed to presage. For now, we are told, the time really has come for the rehabilitation of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, and there is apparently to be an exhibition in Moscow in the fall that will include many of the modernist paintings that are now on view in Washington. Exhibitions of Malevich and Kandinsky are also reported to be in the offing, and we can probably expect some lively traffic in international loan shows in this field in the years ahead—assuming, if we can, that Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* remain in effect. These policies might not do much to alter the one-party rule of the Communist Party—and are clearly not intended to—and their role in improving the moribund Soviet economy remains to be seen. But it does look as if these changes in policy are going to restore the achievements of the Russian and Soviet modernists—the Cubo-Futurists, Constructivists, Suprematists, and sundry other avant-garde groups that once flourished so brilliantly—to the cultural life of the Soviet intelligentsia.

This is not a development to be belittled or despised in my opinion, but we should be clear about exactly what it is—and what it isn't. It is not, I think, an attempt to reforge the once vital link that in the early years of the Revolution united so many elements of the Soviet avant-garde, though never all of them, in the service of the Party and its totalitarian goals. That was a utopian dream from which many members of the avant-garde had awakened as early as 1922 while Lenin still ruled, and its last remnants were shattered forever in the purges and executions of Stalin's terror. Today you are more likely to discover champions of that political dream-fantasy among tenured professors in university art departments in the United States, still prattling on about some grand alliance between avant-garde art and revolutionary politics, than in the studios of Soviet artists. There is no avant-garde in the Soviet Union today, just as there is none in this country; and as for the myth of the Revolution, to the extent that it survives at all in Russia, it now exists only in the discredited rhetoric of the Party, and it isn't even to be found there with anything like its former vigor. In particular, the notion that some form of abstract art might serve to herald a new collectivist society is now as obsolete as the droshky, and it is no more in Gorbachev's interest to revive the one than the other.

If the achievements of the early twentieth-century avant-garde are now to be rehabilitated, it is not because of the political illusions or ideological objectives they once served, but on the contrary, because they have come to represent virtually the only chapter in the history of Russian art since the Revolution that can be genuinely admired on aesthetic grounds. There is little or nothing else that can be salvaged from the

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wreckage of Soviet art. No doubt there will be the usual effort made in official circles to attribute the now acknowledged artistic excellence of the avant-garde to the artists' correct political position—though in certain cases, Kandinsky for example, that will take some doing—but no one but the commissars is likely to believe it. For what this art now stands for in the eyes of the Soviet intelligentsia isn't commitment to revolution or conformity to Party ideology but the kind of freedom of mind and imagination that hasn't been seen in Soviet art since the forced demise of the avant-garde at the end of the Twenties.

There is, moreover, a distinct advantage—a political advantage—for Gorbachev in this restoration of the avant-garde to its rightful position in twentieth-century art, for it is bound to serve the interests of Russian cultural chauvinism both at home and abroad. In the visual arts, after all, the Russian modernists *were* pioneers, and have long been recognized as such wherever modernism has been allowed to develop without political constraints. It isn't so much what they invented that gave the Russian modernists their special distinction, for neither Cubism nor Futurism nor the methods of constructed sculpture originated in Russian art; it was the incredible speed and audacity with which they responded to and appropriated the most radical developments in Western art and transformed them into something genuinely new that made them so remarkable. Unfortunately, the show that is now at the Hirshhorn Museum, though it contains some very good pictures, is far too much of a miscellany—a hodgepodge, really—to make this point very clearly. But there are nonetheless a few paintings that offer some instruction in this regard, especially about the way the Russians speeded up and perfected the aesthetics of abstraction.

Nothing is more extraordinary, in this respect, than the painting called *Movement in Space* (circa 1922) by Mikhail Matiushin. This painting, which consists of stripes of brilliant color—mostly variations on blues, reds, and yellows—placed diagonally across a rectangular canvas surface, caused a sensation when it was exhibited in the "Paris-Moscow" show in 1979, and it is even more startling to see in Washington, where it is bound to evoke comparisons with the work, done decades later of course, of Morris Louis, Gene Davis, Kenneth Noland, and other members of the so-called Washington school of color painters. As far as I know, Matiushin never produced another painting as dazzling as this one. The pictures exhibited in the Costakis Collection at the Guggenheim were all interesting, but none was the equal of *Movement in Space,* which was surely the most radical abstract painting of its day.

Matiushin was altogether an exceptional character, an immensely talented and versatile representative of the pre-Revolutionary liberal intelligentsia who played an important role in the avant-garde both before and after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Born in 1861, he was educated first at the Moscow Conservatory of Music and for nearly twenty years earned his living as a violinist in the Court Orchestra of St. Petersburg. During this period he also studied painting, eventually becoming a student of Bakst. In 1912 he met Malevich, and the following year wrote the music for a famous Futurist opera, *Victory Over the Sun,* for which Malevich designed the sets. He set up his own publishing house in order to bring out a Russian translation of Gleizes and Metzinger's *Du Cubisme* and also published Malevich's treatise, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism.* It is amazing to think of him in his last years—he died in 1934—still devoting himself to his manual on color theory while Stalin's henchmen were systematically destroying everything he had devoted his long life to.

Yet if Matiushin's painting remains the most startling in the exhibition, there are also others—by Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Popova, Puni, Kliun, and Rozanova, to mention only the most impressive—to remind us of what the history of abstract art owes to this Russian school. There are, too, among the representational paintings, two of the

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best Chagalls—both from 1915—you will ever see. Whatever excitement this rehabilitation of the Russian avant-garde may now offer us, however, and to whatever degree it may stimulate our further interest in the truly remarkable achievements of its artists, we should not be under any illusion about the fact that the modernist movement itself has long been dead in the Soviet Union, and that its creative revival—as distinct from its historical restoration—will be a long time coming, if it comes at all. Stalin and his successors did their job only too well. Talents like Kandinsky and Matiushin and Popova, no less than Pasternak and Mandelstam and Akhmatova among the poets, represented the flower of a civilization that predated the Revolution—the civilization that the Revolution destroyed. The creative link with the past was effectively severed, and it is a mistake to think that it can be recovered and made operative again by an act of artistic will even if the state were now prepared to smile on a revival of modernism. The whole tradition of cosmopolitan culture, with its lofty standards and international outlook and ardent devotion to complex aesthetic issues, is gone, and it was from that tradition that the Russian avant-garde derived not only its ideas and ambitions but the spiritual momentum to carry them through to fruition. Such traditions cannot be reconstructed *ex nihilo*.

On this score, it is especially important that we not mistake the copious production of "unofficial" art in the Soviet Union for anything but what it is—an art struggling to be born out of the wasteland of Stalinist kitsch that the Communist Party and its cultural bureaucrats imposed upon the country by force for half a century, and an art, moreover, that is having a very hard time liberating itself from the degraded aesthetic conditions in which it has been obliged to develop. To judge by the recent Sotheby's auction in Moscow, this unofficial, formerly underground art has now, overnight, been rendered sufficiently official and above ground to earn the Kremlin some hard currency. I don't begrudge the poor artists whatever money they may get from this marketing caper, but our sympathy for their plight should not blind us to the quality of their work. Nor should it come as any surprise that there are more than a few art collectors in the West today who will buy anything—and at high prices, too—so long as what they buy is sufficiently novel and sufficiently publicized to earn the purchasers their fifteen minutes of fame. But none of this has anything to do with the artistic triumphs of the avant-garde that perished under Stalin. The new Soviet artists are not so much the heirs of that avant-garde as they are the most recent casualties of the malign powers that destroyed it.

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The NEA: looking back, and looking ahead

by Samuel Lipman

Six years ago, I heard, via a telephone call from the White House, that I was being nominated by the President for a term on the National Council on the Arts, the advisory board of the National Endowment for the Arts. This month my term officially comes to an end, and questions of what has happened, and even more of what has been accomplished, lie heavy on my mind.

I am afraid that I am hardly able to keep a certain valedictory air from suffusing my thoughts. Valediction is the right of the young and of the old; it may accord less well with those who are, as I am, in what might be called the full steam of middle age. And yet in the present context, I do have something to look back on. I have spent most of my life playing the piano, performing music from Bach and Scarlatti to Olivier Messiaen and Elliott Carter. For over a decade now I have been writing about music as a critic. Recently, somewhat to my own surprise, I have begun a kind of third career, as the artistic director of a small but ambitious summer music festival and school.

There is no point in recounting here the fears and reservations which my appointment seems to have aroused in the arts community. I came to the Endowment not just as a critic of American cultural life but as a critic of the role the agency was playing in our artistic life; I also came to the agency with the strongly held belief that what is done must be done well. In any case, despite the hullabaloo over my appointment, the arts, and certainly their advocates, are still very much in evidence six years later; I hope I may be pardoned for saying that I, too, have survived.

As we look forward to the 1990s and to the prospect of a new administration in Washington, the time seems ripe to attempt some consideration of just where matters stand in the public world of the American arts, and some consideration as well of the role the National Endowment for the Arts has played—or has failed to play—in the complex filiation that always obtains between our recent past and our present.

Let me begin with some thoughts on how things looked some years ago, although not *in toto,* for to sketch the entire picture of the arts in America at any given time would require a very large book rather than a mere article. Two issues in particular seem worth focusing on: our working description of arts activity and the arts, and our working description of arts education.

The best place to start is with arts activity and the arts. By the early 1980s, the arts in America had reached a pinnacle of expansion and development unprecedented in our history. There is no need to cite statistics. It is enough to say that the operative word was *more*—more museums, more ballet companies, more modern-dance companies, more theater companies, more creative writing, more poetry, more symphony orchestras, more opera companies, more chamber music ensembles, more avant-garde groups,

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more exhibitions, more performances, more artists, more audiences, more patrons, more administrators, more press, more arts-conscious politicians. Everywhere—more, more, more.

With more, of course, went bigger. Bigger groups, bigger companies, bigger institutions, bigger staffs, bigger earned income, bigger budgets, bigger subsidies, bigger commitments, and, of course, bigger deficits. Perhaps the crowning confirmation of all this bigness was the happy news from the Census Bureau that in 1980 our artists, taken together as a class, amounted to at least one million souls, all struggling to create what at least some people some of the time might be open-minded enough to call art.

Much of this emphasis on more and bigger came from factors powerful in our history for many years, and in some cases going back to the founding of the Republic. We Americans have always been a people with continental ambitions, and our goals in the arts have been little different in form from our goals in agriculture and industry. To feed a continent, to industrialize a continent, and, lest we forget, to school a continent—all this has required monumental labors to guarantee the production of monumental results. The American urge to provide culture was already evident in the nineteenth century in the very different successes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, of Jenny Lind and the Metropolitan Opera, of the Metropolitan Museum and the *Little Blue Books* of the Kansan E. Haldeman Julius. We have often seemed to have a hard time separating quality from quantity; indeed, when faced with a choice between the two, it has been our national bent, and often our national virtue, to choose quantity.

Clearly, quantity in itself is not the whole story of our artistic development. In literature, for example, we have had a powerful national art since the days of Washington Irving. In the visual arts of the past century we have nothing to be ashamed of, and much of which to be proud; modern American painting is admired the world over and, *mirabile dictu,* even here at home. Our twentieth-century dance, helped along in the early years by the likes of Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and Agnes de Mille—and, of course, by the immigrant George Balanchine—is properly our joy.

In the field of music, the situation has been a good bit more complicated, for here we have had to contend at one and the same time with the great achievement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, and with the contemporary European failure to inspire us by extending its own triumphant creations into the present. Our own disappointment in musical composition is perhaps no more than the local manifestation of a condition to be found throughout the Western world; even in this case, however, we happily possess many composers of the past fifty years and more who have written beautiful and enduring music. Of our orchestras, there is little that needs to be said: for the whole of this century, they have been universally accepted as the standard of the world; our choruses, too, like our singers and instrumentalists, have won worldwide recognition.

All in all, the great expansion in American artistic life which took place from the Great Depression to the end of the 1950s, aided by the great post-World War II expansion of college education, strikes me as a remarkable democratic achievement. By the 1960s, however, much had begun to change. Commercial television, so beguiling and full of hope when it transmitted shows like *Omnibus* in the Fifties, quickly showed that sit-com characters and late-night talk-show hosts were to be the new cultural celebrities of our time; by the 1970s, educational television, once thought of as a university of the air, had become what it is today, an upscale vendor of semi-cultivated pabulum for the prosperous. Such general publications of intellectual quality as still existed began increasingly to devote themselves to discussions of politics and "life-styles"; the new trend in periodical journalism toward single-subject magazines guaranteed that the reader's prior educational achievement would

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become an ever less important requirement for his comprehension. In the media as a whole, the inflation of publicity and glamour had begun to make the arts in America into another branch of Broadway and Hollywood. Led by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the cry of pleasure was everywhere in the air, and the forces of seriousness and reflection were in full flight. The consequence of these society-wide developments was a gathering tendency to see the arts as entertainment and artists as entertainers, lavishly paid to sing for their suppers.

As the 1980s succeeded the 1970s, and in particular as the quasi-populist administration of Jimmy Carter came to its end, these developments in art and culture seemed to impinge with particular force on the National Endowment for the Arts, charged as it was with dissolving all our long-accumulated guilt about being the only country in the civilized world without a tradition of direct governmental support for culture. By the end of the Seventies, this agency had been so successful at accomplishing its mission that it seemed to many as if all of America's artistic excellence could be laid at its door. All the activity and all the art, all the employment for artists and all the enjoyment for audiences, all the momentum of artistic civilization in this country—everything seemed to depend for its existence and continuation on the work of a federal agency delivering rather less than a hundred and fifty million dollars each year in subsidies doled out to thousands and thousands of grant applicants.

Such was not the case then, and is not the case now; the NEA makes up only a small part of the funding for the arts in this country. It seems to me that the credit for the propagation of this myth of the NEA's necessary centrality belongs not to artists but to politicians who have manipulated the electronic media and the press.

It is now history that the Reagan administration walked into this situation with scarcely a thought in its collective head. At David Stockman's Office of Management and Budget the determining word in arts and humanities matters was *cut*: cut not to improve, cut not to alter in any thought-out way the endowments' policies, cut not simply to save money, but cut to destroy. This is not the place to go through the long and tedious arguments for and against government support of the arts and the humanities. My confidence in the intellectual probity of all the participants in the debate would be greater if the pro-government-support arguments came more often from those who wish to give their own money to the arts, and if the anti-government-support arguments came more often from those who believe that the arts and humanities require support—of any kind whatsoever.

In the end, of course, the President, aided by a blue-ribbon task force that gave federal art subsidies a clean bill of health, was able to reach agreement with a Congress strongly sympathetic to such support. The NEA budget was cut by only a small amount, and Frank Hodsoll, a career government official well placed in the administration and sympathetic to the idea of arts subsidies, was appointed the agency's chairman.

What was so unfortunate about all the ruckus over abolishing the endowments was that it tended to obscure the very real problems in the fields they served. We must never forget that in our society, government reflects what is going on in the country at large. At the NEA our systemic, debased idea of the marketability of art as entertainment affected the discussion of public policy in a thousand ways, large and small, gross and subtle.

Perhaps a personal recollection will be of some use here in describing just how far this putatively artistic gospel of consumer satisfaction had gone by the early 1980s. In one of the first meetings of the National Council I attended, I interrupted the usual discussion about the poverty-stricken state of American orchestras to ask why some of our great ensembles were paying (with NEA support) second-rank celebrity conductors hundreds of thousands of dollars for rather less than a half-year's work. In answer, I was told by an NEA staff member that the employment of such stars was the only way

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audiences could be inveigled into coming to hear the music.

As it was in music, so it was in the other arts. Institutions were measured by their turnstile count; museum exhibitions were evaluated in terms of drawing power (with the word *drawing* referring not to draughtsmanship but to box office); even the various avant-gardes, once thought to be hermetic, were praised as the coming inheritors of the salable mainstream. Administrators were praised, and large challenge grants awarded, on the basis of a continuing record of budget increases. Agency grants were continually described to the Council by staff members in terms of the "impact" they would have on the artistic field in question or even on the cause of the arts as a whole; it was proudly proclaimed that the major purpose of bringing interns from all over the country to Washington to work at the agency was to spread knowledge of the Endowment and enlarge its reputation. A major concern of the agency two years before the celebration of its twentieth anniversary in 1985 was how to arrange a prime-time television spectacular using the entertainment services of stars from the world of commercial culture to salute the Endowment. Everywhere the goal was to expand and enhance the arts' image as a bringer of pleasure. Everywhere the enemy was the dull image of the status quo. An artistic task well and repeatedly done was invariably seen as evidence that the responsible institution was in a rut—and whatever might be said in favor of old ruts, they certainly weren't as sexy as new waves.

It is not too difficult to see that turning art into amusement is an integral part of what the English poet and critic C. H. Sisson has called "the conversion of religion as well as political events, the 'arts,' and all particular knowledge to the purposes of a power-ridden entertainment world." But beyond the re-definition of the idea of art, this trivialization-through-expansion had a devastating effect on what had once been seen as a civilized glory: I refer here to the calamitous drop in the level of general arts education in America during the 1960s and the 1970s. Under the influence of the doctrine that to feel good is to be good, a two-tier system of the arts was established: professional glamour merchandised to the adult millions on the one hand, and the encouragement of the most aimless self-gratification by children on the other. The monument to the triumph of artistic glamour is, of course, public television, with its incongruous mating of movie stars serving as hosts to the hackneyed tragedies of the operatic stage.

The monument to the destruction of the idea of serious general arts education was *Coming to Our Senses,* the 1977 Arts, Education and Americans Panel Report which summed up where general arts education stood after the triumph of progressive education.[1] For *Coming to Our Senses,* the arts—or rather the cultivation of the senses—were seen as a necessary counterweight to reason, or the life of the mind. This whole approach was well put in a quotation from *Synaesthetic Education,* a 1971 book by Michael F. Andrews which *Coming to Our Senses* placed in a position reserved for approved insights:

> To most persons majoring in Art Education, the term is interpreted to mean a preparation for becoming a teacher who is to train individuals from the observation of nature and the ability to record accurately the socially agreed upon symbolic conventions and facts by a process of drawing and painting . . . . The term Art Education in this sense then, merely confuses the issue, which is not to teach teachers to teach the making of artists; but to free the individual so that he may discover his inner-self and nurture his individual ability to search for, find and apply truths in relation to himself . . . .

Of course, there was nothing in *Coming to Our Senses* about general arts education having as its goal the training of young

1 The American Council on the Arts has issued a revised edition of *Coming to Our Senses* this past July (352 pages, $21.95).

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people in the skills and content of great civilization. The definition of art this 1977 report recommended was, at bottom, to be student-determined:

> Existing standardized materials [should] be reevaluated constantly in order to meet the needs of particular student populations. Materials should be changed or amplified if they do not illuminate the students' life experiences or if they condition students to a narrow definition of acceptable forms of art.

At the Endowment, this new approach to arts education was expressed by a policy of supporting not *art* in education but *artists* in education. There were plausible reasons for this policy: school performances given by artists rather than school classes given by teachers nicely avoided conflict with school bureaucracies for control of funds and curriculum; and the provision of performances in schools seemed a massive and welcome employment opportunity for unemployed artists.

Unfortunately, by the time I came to the Endowment in the early 1980s, the deleterious consequences of this policy, which in so many cases resulted in entertainment rather than teaching, were clear. Little arts education of any substantive kind was going on; teachers were sullen and hostile toward what was perceived as an unwanted invasion by artists; and the very idea of arts education, just because it was seen to depend upon the casual and irregular appearances of outsiders, increasingly seemed irrelevant, frivolous, and totally dispensable.

The time was ripe for a change in educational policy. Under Frank Hodsoll's energetic and patient leadership, several changes were made. The name of the program itself, which had been "Artists in Education," was changed to "Arts in Education." On the level of the allocation of funds, an attempt was made to change what was essentially an artist residency program into one which also allowed for the support of basic education. Furthermore, a strong attempt was made to bring arts teachers, and their representatives, back into Endowment planning, from which they had previously (and with good reason) felt excluded.

Public evidence of what had taken place at the Endowment has now been provided by yet another report, but this time (at least in my opinion) an excellent one. I have in mind *Toward Civilization,* which was prepared by the NEA over a period of about two years and submitted to Congress last May. This report documented the unhappy state of arts education in this country and made substantive suggestions for its amelioration. What seems to me special about this report—so well conveyed by its title—is that it takes a position on just what basic arts education is. Here are the report's opening words:

> Basic arts education aims to provide *all* students, not only the gifted and talented, with knowledge of, and skills in, the arts. Basic arts education must give students the essence of our civilization, the civilizations which have contributed to ours, and the more distant civilizations which enrich world civilization as a whole. It must also give students tools for creating, for communicating, and understanding others' communications, and for making informed and critical choices.

And, a bit later, the report goes on:

> The first purpose of arts education is to give our young people a sense of civilization. American civilization includes many cultures—from Europe, Africa, the Far East, and our own hemisphere. The great works of art of these parent civilizations, and of our own, provide the guideposts to cultural literacy. Knowing them, our young people will be better able to understand, and therefore build on, the achievements of the past; they will also be better able to understand themselves. Great works of art illuminate the constancy of the human condition . . . . Without knowledge of such supreme achievements, we are "culturally illiterate."

If this is to be the wave of the future, then this is one wave we can look forward to.

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The reader will have noticed that, in devoting myself to developments in NEA arts-education policy, I have not as yet had anything to say about the problem I raised earlier: the conversion of art into entertainment. If in arts education I am proud of what has been accomplished at the NEA and moderately optimistic about the effect of its new policy, in the rather more difficult area of our fidelity to the very idea of the arts we serve I am unhappy with the role the Endowment has played in recent years, and I am in no way sanguine about the future.

To illustrate the present situation, allow me to cite a letter I recently received from a person deeply committed to the field of choral music. Here is my paraphrase of what he wrote:

> For many among us, choral performance is especially valuable because, combining as it does significant literature with affecting music, it speaks directly to an audience. It is often an irrational concern of ours that we are unable to secure a public for chorus of an equivalent size to that for operas, ballets, and orchestras.

Curiously enough, this sentiment is not restricted to artistic fields which have traditionally enjoyed only small audiences: it is widespread throughout the arts today. Yet there is no reason to think that the primary blame for the current direction of the arts in America rests with the people who share these sentiments. As I pointed out earlier, we have always thought of collective activities in terms of quantity and size, and in this country perhaps more than abroad, government has a remarkable record of reflecting the wishes of its citizenry. The problems of the arts are not at heart problems for government to solve; even so, the government does have a role: to inform and educate, and to provide a desired leadership.

In recent years as well as over its entire history, the National Endowment for the Arts has not adequately served to make clear the present over-expanded and over-hyped state of the arts in America. The Endowment has not sufficiently encouraged—and explained the reasons for encouraging—either public or private arts funding based on artistic commitment, taste, and knowledge. Too often the Endowment has accepted the mere existence of funding, both public and private, as a good in itself, without asking the reasons behind this funding and its effect on the education of the public. Too often the Endowment has treated the arts as a matter of the financial and social prestige of its backers rather than as a common inheritance of all. Too often the Endowment has failed to press the general case that the arts are a vital part of the civilization which binds our people to each other in the present and binds our past to our future. Above all, too often the Endowment has treated success in numbers as the criterion not just for funding but for the pride it takes in accomplishing its mission. The effect of all this has been to shake the confidence of artists, patrons, and the public alike, whose faith in art is vital to everything we do.

The most interesting presentations I have heard at the National Council on the Arts have centered on how marvelously successful organizations have grown, and how others might follow in their footsteps. By contrast, the artistic presentations which have been made to the Council have usually been of a very drab and second-rate, show-and-tell nature. The discussions of the Council, a group of intelligent people reasonably representative of artists, arts institutions, and state arts agencies, have all too often focused on success by numbers, as if all that can be talked about in the arts is marketing strategy. State arts agencies are routinely complimented by Council members not for the quality of their grants—or even for the high quality of the activity going on in their jurisdictions—but rather for the year-to-year increases in their budgets; the same criterion of size is used when the discussion turns to local arts agencies. It is significant that when the Council focuses on the one Endowment program in which numbers are very difficult to adduce—the Literature Program, which supports individual writers and poets, and small presses—the amount of discussion

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and interest seems to dwindle to the vanishing point.

There has recently been an important controversy which suggests that this habit of judging art by numbers has now come close to becoming a codified part of the way grants are to be awarded. I have in mind here the policy, proposed by Frank Hodsoll more than a year ago, of determining grant amounts by directly relating an institution's artistic ranking to its budget size. The announced goal of this new policy was to correct various inconsistencies resulting from the present system, whereby institutions of lower artistic ranking and lower budgets from time to time received a greater percentage of their budgets supported by the Endowment than institutions of higher artistic ranking and higher budgets.

The new policy would involve a major change in the functioning of the Endowment's peer panels, the groups of artists and administrators charged with making the primary decisions about grants. Hitherto, panels had based their judgments first upon artistic ranking, and then adjusted the resulting grant amounts—on an *ad hoc* basis—so that questions of scale might be taken into account. According to the new policy, panels were to use the scale of applicants' activities, along with their artistic ranking, as a necessary factor in determining grant amounts. The change in the outcome of this new panel process would be great: if budgets were to be a required factor in determining amounts, larger-budget applicants, in a time of flat Endowment appropriations, would receive increased funding, while smaller-budget applicants would receive less. The signal sent to the world of art would be clear: henceforth, artistic achievement would properly be judged by money, not art.

The battle over the Chairman's proposed new policy has raged for many months. The possibility of obtaining a more consistent set of grants seemed, at first, reason enough for many, including me, to support the new process. But as an attempt was made to put the new policy into practice, it became clear that the effect would be to make scale of activity the determining factor, and a factor furthermore that would unduly reward large applicants. From various artistic fields came an almost unanimous defense of the present *ad hoc* process; the Chairman, in turn, made a spirited defense of his position that fairness requires the explicit factoring of budget size into grant decisions.

I am happy to say that the National Council on the Arts was drawn into the controversy, and for the first time in my memory there were sustained discussions at the Council which explicitly recognized that big budgets and high levels of activity do not necessarily bring with them art of permanent value. These discussions took an often militant "art first, budgets second" position. At the National Council meeting in St. Louis in May, a compromise between the Chairman, intent on changing panel procedure, and the Council, united in opposition to the idea of grant-making by budget size, was arranged. According to this compromise, information about an applicant's budget size would be made available to panels, which they might use to provide consistency in their grant-making; in the absence of such consistency, the panels would have to provide explanations for any anomalies that may thus result.

It is difficult to say where we stand now. The primary importance of the artistic judgments made by peer panels, the very heart of the Endowment's traditional way of making grants, has come under attack. The Chairman has been widely accused of wishing to impose some kind of formulaic funding. Furthermore, there have been indications that the Congress, under severe pressure in an election year from the artistic fields, might go so far as to use the upcoming Endowment appropriation bill to prohibit any change in the status quo. Should the Congress ever take this matter into its own hands, a questionable precedent would be established whereby the legislature would determine Endowment guidelines.

Unwisely, the defenders of the present system have seen fit to oppose *any* use of

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budget data in panel deliberations. Moreover, there has been much extravagant talk, from people who are highly capable of rational decision-making, about the need to make grants on the basis of intuitiveness and subjectivity. Equally unwisely, the Chairman pushed ahead too fast at the beginning with the imposition of his initiative, without waiting for a consensus to be reached outside Washington. What is more, he did not make clear the implications of his new policy—who would get more money, and who would get less.

My own position in this matter is that panels should employ all available data in reaching their decisions; an applicant's budget size should always be taken into consideration, so that the amount of money granted might be in reasonable relation to the quality, activity, and need of the applicant. But just as important, there is no *necessary* correlation between budget size and the artistic needs and aspirations of an artist or of an institution. In awarding grants, it is always vital to be sure that artistic ranking is based on talent and aspiration, not on the advantages money can buy.

So important is all this for the future of the relations between the applicants and the Endowment, and indeed for the future status and working of the Endowment itself, that it behooves us to stand back and look dispassionately at the core of the controversy. This core is our old national problem of the supposed virtue of size. Size of audience, it goes without saying, is closely related to size of budget; within any given artistic field, institutions with larger audiences almost always have larger budgets. More expensive productions draw larger audiences; larger audiences cost more to satisfy (I almost wrote *to entertain*). Artistic ranking itself, properly the primary concern of panels, is often closely related to budget size; bigger budgets, after all, mean more money for artists, more money for productions and exhibitions, more money for administrators to arrange better presentations, more money for development personnel to raise more money for better presentations—and for bigger budgets.

None of this is necessrily wrong. It is all just a fact of life: the race is often to the large as well as to the swift. But to put matters this way is once again to load the discussion in favor of big budgets, big audiences, and the performance of entertainments that allow audiences to grow. Alas, it is no secret that today it is not the biggest and the busiest arts organizations that are under the strongest economic pressure; it is rather the medium-sized institutions, deeply rooted in medium-sized communities, that are beginning to feel the threat of financial failure. A quick glance at our marvelous symphony orchestras of intermediate budget size will show an increasing and unacceptable attrition rate over the recent past; the salvation of these institutions does not lie in the expansion of budgets, even if such expansion might bring larger government grants; it lies in the stabilization of their costs and, at the same time, the artistic education of their audiences and private contributors.

Above all, there is no way in which the concentration on largeness of budget *per se* as a criterion for support can do anything but further degrade the image of the arts and the civilization which we all wish to further. It is high time that we recognize the primary artistic contribution made by serious institutions and artists who cultivate neither the celebrity glamour of big budgets nor the artificially controversial hype of the so-called avant-garde "cutting edge."

This position can be summed up in a credo: The greatest art, just as the greatest civilization, is the heritage of all. Therefore, education in art is the noblest function of the artist, just as education in the humanities is the noblest function of the humanist. To accomplish this function, the idea of art must be kept as something shining, golden —and serious. To cherish this elevated idea of art cannot be the task of artists alone; it also must be the task of all, politicians, patrons, and public alike, who cherish the future of civilization in a democratic and capitalist society.

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The poetic legacy of William Carlos Williams

by Bruce Bawer

So conscious are we nowadays of the extraordinary influence upon postmodern American poetry of William Carlos Williams—the second and concluding volume of whose collected poems has now been published—that it can be easy to forget that, during the heyday of the modernist movement, Williams was widely regarded as, at best, a second-tier figure.[1] Even Ezra Pound, who had known Williams since their college days and had helped secure publication for much of the poet-physician's early work, made it clear (to Williams's chagrin) that his old friend's poetic career interested him less than that of Pound's fellow expatriate T. S. Eliot. Indeed, it was not until the waning years of the modernist era—1937, to be exact—that James Laughlin and New Directions entered Williams's life, finally providing him with a steady publisher and effective distribution, and thus offering him some hope, at least, of a large audience for his verse. And it was not until the Forties and Fifties, when he began to win the allegiance of a widely influential younger generation of poets—whose aesthetic ideas were, in many instances, dramatically at odds with those of Williams's modernist confreres—that his name unquestionably joined those of Eliot and Pound in the pantheon of first-rank modern American poets.

And yet even to juxtapose his name with that of T. S. Eliot is to be reminded how utterly different Williams was from the man who, during both their lifetimes, came to be regarded as the very personification of literary modernism. If Eliot expressed his subtle, sophisticated philosophy of modernism in a prose that was crafted with rare precision and meticulousness, Williams proffered essentially uncomplicated ideas about poetry in a prose whose wordiness and lack of rigor often made those ideas seem confusing and contradictory. If Eliot saw modernism as a means of re-affirming literary tradition and of asserting the value of civilization, Williams (though a suburban homeowner and a family man) saw himself as a primitive, an aesthetic rebel. If Eliot, in his poetry, labored over lines that were more dense, allusive, comprehensive, and symbolic than anything in living memory, Williams churned out poems that were deliberately flat, talky, trivial, and naturalistic. If Eliot was supremely conscious of the weight of the past, Williams dwelled upon the evanescent moment. If Eliot was the intellectual, exalting the values of the mind, Williams was the anti-intellectual, exalting the values of the heart and flesh and muscle, and calling for "no ideas but in things." If Eliot was High Church, Williams was an observer of the Common Man. If, finally, Eliot identified himself unashamedly with *literature,* Wil-

1 *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams,* edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, New Directions. Volume I (1909-1939), 579 pages, $35; Volume II (1939-1962), 553 pages, $37.

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liams despised the word and all that it connoted. Each in his own way sought to liberate poetry from late Victorian sentimentality, banality, and degraded romanticism; to that extent they were allied in the modernist cause. But the directions in which they sought to take twentieth-century poetry were strikingly divergent.

There was one other important distinction between them. Eliot, born into a Protestant St. Louis family that had been in America for two centuries, left America, wrote polyglot verse, and turned himself into the consummate Englishman. Williams —whose parents had lived in Puerto Rico, whose father was English, and whose French-speaking Catholic mother was descended from Basques and Dutch Jews—not only remained in America during the expatriate days of the 1920s but made Americanness and the American language the very foundation of his poetic principles. Americans, Williams argued, spoke a different language from the English—a language with its own vocabulary, rhythms, and inflections—and should therefore write a different poetry. He maintained in particular that the trappings of traditional form—rhyme, meter—were inappropriate to America in the twentieth century. "I say we are *through* with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived," he declared in a 1948 lecture, "through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza, the sonnet." As he saw it, modern American poets should not work patiently to make a poem as distant, lean, and polished as possible (as Eliot and the New Critics might have suggested) but should rather regard it as a "field of action." Eliot's austere verses, Williams insisted, reflect a perverse, reactionary conviction that poetry "increases in virtue as it is removed from contact with a vulgar world"; Williams proposed that American poetry should, on the contrary, be close to the ground, democratic, "local." It was wrong, therefore, for American poets to remove themselves from their native soil: in order to write truly American poems, they had to live in America, among Americans.

Williams set himself, in short, in direct opposition to the man from St. Louis. Indeed, as Paul Mariani observes in his exhaustive, reverent 1981 biography *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked,* Eliot was "Williams' bete noir, Williams' most celebrated literary antagonist. It was a battle in which Williams was consistently on the offense and in which Eliot, from his established vantage, chose simply to ignore Williams—at least publicly." To read Mariani's biography is to recognize that Williams's hostility toward Eliot, and his wellnigh fanatical insistence that modern American poetry should reject old forms and rhythms (a notion which has, of course, become strongly ingrained in the minds of succeeding generations of American poets), was largely a defense mechanism—in part a means of Freudian rebellion against his English father, and in part a means of adjusting psychologically to his own feeling of neglect by his expatriate colleagues, his sense of isolation in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, and his deep resentment of the attention and praise accorded to Eliot by Pound (and, later, by the entire civilized world). To read Mariani is to appreciate the truth of Pound's observation, in a letter of the early Twenties, that if Williams did not join the exodus to Europe it was not because of any theory about American poetry but because he didn't have the nerve to leave home.

For the fact is that Williams was never a reckless, adventurous spirit, like Pound; nor could he ever have utterly transformed himself, as Eliot did. Born in 1883, Williams was a timid and naïve young man who spent many years in the shadow of his younger brother Ed, an architect and winner of the Prix de Rome; it was, indeed, his beloved Charlotte Herman's preference for Ed that prompted the twenty-five-year-old Williams to propose marriage to Charlotte's less attractive sister, Florence (Floss), with whom he would live, for a full half-century, in the town of his birth. The young Williams comes across in Mariani's pages—and in those of Williams's own slapdash, episodic

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Autobiography (1951)—as good-natured but pathetic, devoted to poetry but lacking a sense of identity, confused and directionless and desperate for guidance. Though he had his share of innate ambition, aggression, and rebelliousness, his mother's nearly fanatical moral idealism seems to have led him, as a young man, to adopt standards of virtue that succeeded only in immobilizing him. Reading about his youth, one can picture his rebelliousness building up inside him, awaiting an outlet; reading about his adult life, one wonders at its conspicuous monotony and conventionality: how could this numbingly settled middle-class life have been led by so rebellious a poet?

Yet if Williams was so rebellious in his poetry, perhaps it was, in large part, because poetry was the only realm in which he could bring himself to be audacious, to perform a major act of will. It was poetry, in other words, that provided a lifelong escape valve for Williams's otherwise powerfully suppressed rebellious instincts. And it was a college friend two years his junior who first showed him the way. Soon after entering the medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, the nineteen-year-old Williams met a flamboyant, egocentric seventeen-year-old sophomore named Ezra Pound, who was already full of radical, outrageous ideas about poetry. Pound was eager to recruit disciples, and he found one in Williams; almost overnight, Pound became Williams's mentor. For the next several years, to be sure, Williams continued to write in traditional forms: he spent years polishing a breathtakingly bad medieval epic in blank verse, and his first, privately published book, *Poems* (which he compiled in 1909, soon after receiving from London a copy of Pound's debut volume, *A Lume Spento*), was a collection of insipid late-Victorian verses in rhyming couplets and the like ("Innocence can never perish;/Blooms as fair in looks that cherish/Dim remembrance of the days/When life was young . . ."). But when Pound—who by then was in London, working for William Butler Yeats—informed him that this would not do, and advised him to read Yeats, Browning, Thompson, Swinburne, and Rossetti, the twenty-five-year-old Williams obediently changed direction. Or, at least, began to. Williams's next book, *The Tempers*—issued in 1913 by Pound's own London publisher, Elkin Mathews—was not all that Pound wanted it to be, and when he reviewed it for *The New Freewoman* he praised Williams more for his "vigour" than for his artistry. But Williams, who would become as zealous a modernist as he had once been a moralist, was doing his best to please his mentor: in these poems he solemnly imitates Pound's own imitations of that period, variously mimicking Pound as Elizabethan ("Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses, / Thou art my Lady . . ."), Pound as Browning ("Miserly, is the best description of that poor fool/Who holds Lancelot to have been a morose fellow . . ."), and Pound's protégée H. D. as ancient Greek ("O, prayers in the dark!/O, incense to Poseidon! /Calm in Atlantis").

After *The Tempers,* Williams might conceivably have developed in any direction. It was doubtless, to a considerable degree, the early poetry of T. S. Eliot—whom Pound met, and began to promote tirelessly, sometime between *The Tempers* and Williams's next book, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917)—which helped Williams to determine the precise course his development did take. From the beginning, the salient fact about Pound's fair-haired boy from St. Louis was that he was *literary*: while Williams had been studying pediatrics and obstetrics, the future author of *The Waste Land* had been studying philosophy and languages, reading Laforgue and Dante and the Metaphysical poets, and taking courses taught by Irving Babbitt and Henri Bergson. He had learned to despise Romanticism, which celebrated the raw, untutored, and spontaneous, and to admire reason and discipline; even such early Eliot poems as "La Figlia che Piange" mirror their author's belief that the more intelligent a modern poet was, the better, and that it was good for poems to reflect subtlety of thought, breadth of knowledge, and a thorough acquaintance with the classics. But

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though most of Eliot's literary contemporaries would gradually come to accept this judgment—and though an entire generation of poets, on both sides of the Atlantic, would labor to produce verses that satisfied Eliot's criteria—Williams patently knew from the start that he could never hold his own against Eliot on such grounds. "Since I cannot compete with him in knowledge of philosophy," he wrote in a surprisingly candid letter of the late Twenties, "nor even technical knowledge of the conned examples of English poetry which he seems to know so well—what is left for me but to fall back on words?" To fall back, that is, on a species of modern poetry which eliminated all the things Eliot did better than Williams, a poetry characterized by plain, flat, and even (in Wallace Stevens's phrase) "anti-poetic" language. A poetry, in short, utterly antithetical to that of T. S. Eliot.

The beauty part was that Pound—whom Williams would call "our greatest and rightest poet," and whose eccentric epistolary style he often imitated in his own missives—had already identified such a species. In 1912 Pound had founded the Imagist school of poetry, and (with H. D. and Richard Aldington) had set forth three supreme poetic principles: directness, concision, and natural rhythm. A good Imagist poem—Pound held up his two-line "In a Station of the Metro" as an example ("The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough")—was a short, tightly focused representation of a single sensual experience; it was common for such poems to have a vaguely Oriental or Hellenic flavor and metaphorically to equate human images with natural ones. To be sure, Pound's Imagist phase didn't last long; within two years his poetry had changed drastically, and though he would continue to write for another half-century he would never again produce an Imagist poem. Brief though it was, however, it had been during this phase that Pound's manner was at its furthest remove from that of T. S. Eliot. Given Williams's fervent admiration for Pound and his loathing for Eliot, it is not surprising that Williams made Imagism the *point d'appui* in his quest for a mature style. One thing seems relatively certain: if Eliot, in the words of an astonished Pound, had "modernized himself *on his own,*" Pound's influence played a crucial role in Williams's development into a modernist poet.

There were, of course, other influences in these early years. The New York Armory Show of 1913, for instance, brought to America the paintings of many modern artists—including Picasso, Braque, and Duchamp—whose work would later be described as influential upon Williams's poetry; during World War One, moreover, Williams became one of a group of artists and writers associated with the avant-garde New York literary magazine *Others,* among them Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Alfred Kreymborg. But Pound's Imagist phase remained the foundation of Williams's verse. *Sour Grapes* (1921) consists largely of modest, Imagist-style poems in which unsentimental images of man and nature are brought together. "Spring" is all of two lines long: "O my grey hairs!/You are truly white as plum blossoms." The collection also contains, however, at least one poem that belongs to what Williams's admirers might call his major phase, "The Great Figure":

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

Williams tells the story behind this poem (which inspired Charles Demuth's 1928 painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*) in the

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Autobiography. Walking one summer day down West Fifteenth Street in Manhattan, headed for the painter Marsden Hartley's studio, Williams "heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it." "The Great Figure" is a typical major-phase Williams poem: a quickly scribbled description of a brief experience. Though its roots are in Imagism, this poem abandons the timeless natural subjects, the refined style, and the slightly stylized tone typical of Imagism for the purpose of rendering in plain, telegraphic language a "sudden and forceful" impression of a modern, urban, technological phenomenon. It is one of many familiar poems in which Williams does not shrink from, but rather observes carefully, celebrates, and expresses a childlike wonder at, the mechanical, the grubby, the vulgar, the trivial, the homely, the banal, or the grossly physical. One thinks, for instance, of "The Attic Which is Desire:" (1930), in which the word *SODA* is printed vertically, surrounded by asterisks, as a means of representing a neon sign visible from Williams's attic window; of "Poem" (1930), which offers a step-by-step description of a cat climbing "over/the top of/the jamcloset"; of "This is Just to Say" (1934), in which Williams apologizes to Floss for eating some plums she had left in the icebox; of "To a Poor Old Woman" (1935), a description of a woman on the street, enjoying a bag of plums ("They taste good to her/They taste good/to her. They taste/good to her"); and of "Between Walls" (1938):

the back wings
of the

hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle

As an obstetrician and pediatrician to the lower and middle classes, moreover, Williams was in a position to observe ordinary Americans at close range and in their most natural state; he had an ear for the way these people talked, and some of his more effective poems are, in large part, transcriptions of their conversation. A typical example (though it is based on the testimony not of a patient but of a nurse) is "The Raper from Passeneck," first collected in *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935):

. . . if I get a
venereal infection out of this
I won't be treated.

I refuse. You'll find me dead in bed
first. Why not? That's
the way she spoke,

I wish I could shoot him. How would
you like to know a murderer?
I may do it.

I'll know by the end of this week.
I wouldn't scream. I bit him
several times

but he was too strong for me.
I can't yet understand it. I don't
faint so easily.

When I came to myself and realized
what had happened all I could do
was to curse

and call him every vile name I could
think of. I was so glad
to be taken home.

I suppose it's my mind—the fear of
infection. I'd rather a million times
have been got pregnant.

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> But it's the foulness of it can't
> be cured. And hatred, hatred of all men
> —and disgust.

Such poems as this benefit from Williams's willingness to contemplate less than uplifting varieties of experience. In some Williams poems, however, the graphic naturalism seems gratuitous. Frequently he seems to take a small boy's delight in Anglo-Saxon words for bodily functions, writing in "Turkey in the Straw" (1950), for instance, that "On my 65th birthday/I kissed her [Floss] while she pissed." In a lesser known poem, "April is the Saddest Month" (1948)—whose title, needless to say, is a variation on the first line of *The Waste Land*—Williams deliberately emphasizes the contrast between his own attention to earthy detail and Eliot's high seriousness by bluntly describing two dogs mating: "There they were/stuck/dog and bitch." There is an air of contrivance about such poems, an almost adolescent need to shock.

Having entered his major phase with *Sour Grapes,* Williams spent the remainder of the Twenties concentrating on prose. Among his principal publications of this decade were a volume of radically experimental "improvisations" called *Kora in Hell* (1920); an anti-novel, reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, called *The Great American Novel* (1923); a historical survey, reminiscent of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature,* called *In the American Grain* (1923); and the first of several largely autobiographical novels, *A Voyage to Pagany* (1928). With the exception of the novel—which, though less than exquisitely shaped, is at least coherent and readable, and possesses a degree of human interest—these books are all sloppy, self-conscious, and inchoate. A similar type of prose finds its way into Williams's poetry volumes of this period: in both *Spring and All* (1923) and *The Descent of Winter* (1928) Williams alternates prose and verse. The prose in the earlier book consists mostly of discursive notes on the nature of imagination, poetry, and their relation to reality. It is divided into "chapters," all of which are numbered (but not sequentially) and some of which are exceedingly short. The tone can be strident, at times sardonically so: "The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of 'art,' takes the lead! Her feet are bare and not too delicate. In fact those who come behind her have much to think of. Hm. Let it pass." And the book is positively rife with flippancies: "I realize that the chapters are rather quick in their sequence and that nothing much is contained in any one of them but no one should be surprised at this today."

The governing theme of Spring and All would seem to be that imaginative writing exists in its own realm, in some sense apart from the world of physical reality, in some sense connected to it. As ever, though, Williams's prose doesn't do a very good job of explaining these matters. Contradictions abound. At one point, for instance—in a clumsily worded allusion to Pater's graceful observation that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music"—Williams states, "I do not believe that writing is music. I do not believe writing would gain in quality or force by seeking to attain to the conditions of music." Two sentences later, however, he seems to be operating from the assumption that it is a good thing for writing to be like music:

> According to my present theme the writer of imagination would attain closest to the conditions of music not when his words are dissociated from natural objects and specified meanings but when they are liberated from the usual quality of that meaning by transposition into another medium, the imagination.

Williams was not the only modern American poet to concern himself with the relationship between the imagination and reality. In a number of essays, Wallace Stevens discussed this relationship with insight and eloquence; every time he took the trouble to write another essay on the topic, it was clear that he did so because he felt he had brought his understanding of it into some-

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what sharper focus. Williams, alas, is a different case: he doesn't seem to have any idea what he thinks about imagination and reality, and the passages on this theme in *Spring and All* show him flailing about helplessly, grabbing at one analogy after another in an attempt to hit on something that sounds close to the truth.

Spring and All is concerned also with the advent of spring. Among Williams's goals here, plainly, is to write about this most hackneyed of poetic topics without resorting to the usual literary clichés and associations. He does this with some success, most notably in the familiar opening poem:

> By the road to the contagious hospital
> under the surge of the blue
> mottled clouds driven from the
> northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
> waste of broad, muddy fields
> brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen
>
> patches of standing water
> the scattering of tall trees
>
> All along the road the reddish
> purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
> stuff of bushes and small trees
> with dead, brown leaves under them
> leafless vines—
>
> Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
> dazed spring approaches—
>
> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save that they enter. All about them
> the cold, familiar wind—
>
> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
>
> One by one objects are defined—
> It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
>
> But now the stark dignity of
> entrance—Still, the profound change
> has come upon them: rooted, they
> grip down and begin to awaken

As Donald Davie has noted, this poem is effective largely because Williams's characteristic weaknesses—a blunt, graceless style, an inability to effect smooth transitions—happen to be exactly what are called for here; the very point of the poem is to celebrate the season without romanticizing it, without falling into the lilting rhythms and false diction of the conventional paean to spring.

But much of the verse in *Spring and All*—like much of Williams's poetry in general—is of slender merits. A number of the poems I have mentioned, such as "The Great Figure" and "This Is Just to Say," fall into this category. At their best, such poems are snapshots, effectively recording stray moments, capturing small gestures, and calling attention to some of the more mundane moments of life. But they are little more than that, whatever else Williams's admirers may claim for them. Let us consider a specimen poem from *Spring and All,* one of his most well known and widely anthologized, "The Red Wheelbarrow":

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

Plainly, the speaker here feels that the wheelbarrow and chickens have some importance in the universe. But what is the nature of that importance? It's unclear. Nor does the poem succeed in making the reader feel this importance. The pictorial details alone, as Williams gives them, are hardly enough to evoke an experience that would sensibly explain why "so much depends upon" this wheelbarrow and these chickens. Williams himself explained that the theme of "The Red Wheelbarrow" was "the perfection of new forms as additions to nature";

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and surely one can imagine that a fascination with the way man-made objects integrate into nature might have been the inspiration for this poem. But one can't really say that the poem communicates much of anything. What, then, does it have to offer? Some critics claim to find a "purity" in such poems as this. Perhaps there *is* a purity here, but if so, it has less to do with the sense or the sound of the words Williams has chosen, or with the way he has strung them together, than with all that clean white space surrounding the text. So little innate significance does this poem have, in fact, that it would seem to be deliberately inviting the reader to force some meaning upon it.

Now, throughout most of Williams's career, serious poetry critics had little patience for such gambits; since the foremost purpose of interpretation was to try to understand how an effective work of art manages to achieve its effect, a poem had to prove itself aesthetically deserving before a critic would take the trouble to dissect it. The postwar era, however, has seen a rise in the influence of a kind of academic critic who typically discusses a poem at exhaustive length without even addressing the question of what makes it worth analyzing; the attitude of such critics seems to be that whatever observations they make are self-justifying, that because it is possible to say certain things about a poem, they are necessarily worth saying. Such critics love a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow" because its very brevity and simplicity pose little challenge to their actually quite modest critical skills, while at the same time allowing them to show off their ingenuity by "finding" an abundance of hidden meaning in eight tiny lines of poetry. Even a very good critic who works exhaustively at explicating a long, complex, brilliant poem—such as, say, Auden's "In Praise of Limestone"—will still find himself, at the end, in the shadow of the poet's magnificent intelligence; but a mediocre critic who manages to fill two or three pages with fanciful interpretations of "The Red Wheelbarrow" will end up impressing a lot of readers. *Imagine,* people think, *being able to get so much out of so little!* Academic poetry critics love Williams because he makes it easy for critics to look more important than the poems they're writing about.

Poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow" have accordingly become staples of the classroom and the scholarly essay. In a typical treatment, Marjorie Perloff (perhaps the most prominent Williams critic in the academy today) explains in *The Dance of the Intellect* that what's important in "The Red Wheelbarrow" is not the poem's subject but "the interaction of lines":

> "Wheel" is separated from "barrow," "rain" from "water," using cuts that make us rethink the meaning of these compound nouns. Further, the morphemes "bárrow," "wáter," and "chíckens" each constitute a trochee, the "weight" of the red wheelbarrow being what "so much (the food supply? the farmer's survival? the pastoral order?) depends upon." Like a hard-edged painting, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a composition in simple, primary colors—red and white—a red offset just slightly by the "glaze" of rainwater. The white chickens beside the red wheelbarrow: a synecdoche for an image of "the farm." And the picture is "framed" neatly by its stanzaic structure: the syllable count is 4/2, 3/2, 3/2, 4/2.

Similarly, after devoting a page or so to an analysis of the "visual pattern" of "Between Walls" (Williams's poem about pieces of green glass among cinders), Perloff maintains that although Williams said the poem is about how "in a waste of cinders loveliness, in the form of color, stands up alive,"

> what we admire in "Between Walls" is surely less the idea that beauty can be found even among trash, than the way this small observation is turned into a "field of action" in which line plays against syntax, visual against aural form, creating what Charles Olson was to call an energy-discharge, or projectile. Words are "unlink[ed] from their former relationships in the sentence" and recombined so that the poem becomes a kind of hymn to linguistic possibility.

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To read the sort of criticism that Perloff perpetrates in these lines is to wonder whether such a critic has ever had a genuine aesthetic experience. Does Perloff really believe that "Between Walls" creates an "energy-discharge"? Does she really think that anyone who has ever read "The Red Wheelbarrow" has had a sense of the poem being "framed" by its first and last lines? In exactly what way do that poem's line breaks make *her* rethink the meaning of the words *wheelbarrow* and *rainwater*? Has it ever occurred to her that before a poem can succeed at being a "hymn to linguistic possibility," it has to be something else first—namely, a successful poem? Perloff is precisely the sort of critic who has made it possible for Williams to triumph in the academy: in her mind, the important thing about a poem is not its aesthetic value but its susceptibility to ingenious critical methods. To a critic like Perloff, the wonderful thing about a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow" is that there's so little *poem* to get in the way of whatever she wants to make of it.

In his collections of the Thirties and Forties—among them *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935), *Adam & Eve & the City* (1936), and *The Wedge* (1944)—Williams dropped the intercalated prose that had characterized *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter*. But he did introduce prose, in a big way, into the multi-volume poem he regarded as his *magnum opus*, his answer to Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. *Paterson*—which was originally planned as a four-volume work (1946-51), though Williams added a fifth book in 1958—is an attempt to mythologize both a man and a city; the city is Paterson, New Jersey, and the man is the poet, also called Paterson, whom Williams identifies with the city. His "Author's Note" to the poem is worth reproducing in full because it is murky in much the same way as the poem itself:

> *Paterson* is a long poem in four parts—that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions. Part One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language to make them vocal, and Four, the river below the falls, will be reminiscent of episodes—all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime.

Though *Paterson* (which is omitted from *The Collected Poems*) contains a number of fine passages and arresting lines, it simply doesn't add up to a cohesive work of art. If one may borrow from Horace and call *The Waste Land* an example of "inharmonious harmony," *Paterson* is, by comparison, thoroughly cacophonous. It is far less compelling than either *The Waste Land* or *Cantos*, and far less fastidiously composed, too; for a poem of its ambitions, it contains a shocking amount of bad, lazy, and pretentious writing. I am speaking of the poetry here, because most of the prose is not by Williams. Some of this prose—mostly concerning the history of Paterson—is borrowed from old newspapers, history books, and the like. Some is epistolary: Williams includes the complete, unadulterated texts of several letters which had been sent to him, including one from a young admirer named Allen Ginsberg. And there are miscellaneous items: Book Three, for example, contains a page-long chart detailing the kinds of stone that may be found at various levels of a 2,100-foot-deep Paterson artesian well. It is hard to defend, on aesthetic grounds, the inclusion of some of these materials; at times Williams seems utterly frivolous, and eventually one has the feeling that his major motivation for *Paterson* was nothing more than the desire to write a long, important modern poem. Even Williams seems to have recognized that the poem—especially in its later books—was a failure; but he argued (not very convincingly) that this was appropriate, since the poem was about a "failure of speech."

Williams never again wrote a poem as

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expansive as *Paterson,* but in his collections of the Fifties and Sixties he was considerably more successful at working in relatively long forms. It was in *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954)—a collection of poems that were, on average, much longer than his typical verses of earlier decades—that Williams introduced, on a large scale, his famous triadic stanza. As seen in the opening lines of the lovely poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," the triadic stanza requires that every second line of a poem be indented so much, and every third line so much more:

> Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
> like a buttercup
> upon its branching stem—
> save that it's green and wooden—
> I come, my sweet,
> to sing to you.
> We lived long together
> a life filled,
> if you will,
> with flowers. So that
> I was cheered
> when I came first to know
> that there were flowers also
> in hell.

Williams trumpeted his invention of this stanza—which first appeared in Book Two of *Paterson,* and was used consistently not only in *The Desert Music* but in *Journey to Love* (1955)—as if he had made a discovery on the order of penicillin. Throughout his career he had sought to represent, in poetry, the stress patterns of American English, and in his mind this triadic stanza was the best answer he'd seen; it offered, he said, a "solution [to] the problem of modern verse." Manifestly, he liked it because it didn't look like free verse, a term he despised as implying a lack of discipline; though he never would have put it this way, the wonderful thing for Williams about the triadic stanza was obviously that it allowed him to write free verse that didn't *look* like free verse. Indeed, though the stanza made no metrical demands upon him, Williams described each line, paradoxically, as a "variable foot." And as the engaging first lines of "The Descent" demonstrate, a "variable foot" could consist of one word or ten, two syllables or seventeen:

> The descent beckons
> as the ascent beckoned.
> Memory is a kind
> of accomplishment,
> a sort of renewal
> even
> an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
> places
> inhabited by hordes
> heretofore unrealized,
> of new kinds—

It is a mark of the dubious nature of much of Williams's literary criticism that one of his justifications for the use of the variable foot was that since the world is relativistic, the poetic foot should be, too.

For all Williams's talk of innovation, however, the triadic stanza—as some critics have noted—isn't really all that different from the short, unindented three-line stanzas in which Williams had written many of his earlier poems. (Interestingly, most of the new poems included in Williams's last poetry collection, the 1962 *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems,* don't make use of the stanza.) It may be said, as a matter of fact, that the more important distinction of these later volumes is the greater warmth, fullness, lyricism, sustained coherence, and even grace that characterize many of the poems in them; on the whole, they are both more abstract and more personal than the bulk of Williams's earlier work. It is as if Williams—who in his earlier poems seems usually to have been satisfied with brief glimpses of people—finally began to discover, late in life, that human beings and ideas can be at least as interesting as wheelbarrows, that the contents of a person's mind and soul can be every bit as compelling as the contents of his refrigerator. This is not to suggest that the ideas he introduced in these later poems are necessarily first-class;

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doubtless many an admirer of "Asphodel" has winced at the well-known lines in its coda: "If a man die/it is because death/has first/possessed his imagination." (Likewise, the most impressive thing, to me, about Williams's famous refrain in *Paterson* on the role of ideas in poetry—"no ideas but in things"—is that it manages to break its own rule.)

But then one should not be surprised that most of Williams's poetry is less than profound. "Why do you write?" he once asked himself in print. His answer was: "To have nothing in my head." Alas, he was spectacularly successful in achieving this goal; there is no greater flaw in his poetry than its thoroughgoing, and sometimes almost aggressive, mindlessness. Whether this was the consequence of a deliberate suppression of intellect or was something he couldn't avoid, we can't know for sure. We do know that he bragged endlessly about his fuzziness of mind ("I exist in a matrix of confusion") and about his unreflecting approach to poetic composition ("Write carelessly," he advised in *Paterson,* "so that nothing that is not green will survive"); we also know that he was either incapable of, or uninterested in, writing coherent argumentative or expository prose. To read Williams's critical oeuvre is to get the feeling that, for all his fulminating about dead forms and English rhythms and the need for a modern American measure, he never really had a clear idea of *why* he wanted to be a modernist. Though some of his innovations (not only the variable foot, but also the notion of a poem as a field of action) and catchphrases ("no ideas but in things") were supremely influential, he was not particularly good at explaining any of them—not even, one suspects, to himself.

Consider, for instance, his dismissal of conventional poetic forms as artificial, antiquated, and unsuited to American verse. Williams even went so far as to call Auden a failure because of his attachment to form. But Williams's reasoning was, shall we say, less than airtight: he argued that modern American poets shouldn't write in rhyme or iambic pentameter because modern Americans don't talk in rhyme or iambic pentameter. That no people in history ever *have* talked in rhyme or iambic pentameter didn't seem to strike him as a flaw in his argument. The profoundly unfortunate fact about his crusade against poetic conventions is that while he thought of himself as a literary insurrectionist who sought to lead American poetry out of the prison of form, the ultimate consequence of his efforts was to reduce drastically the expressive options available to an entire generation of American poets. Thanks largely to Williams, any sort of formal trappings became *démodé* in American poetry in the Sixties and Seventies—so much so that a young poet who violated the norms was likely to face condescension from colleagues, automatic rejection from editors, and lectures from his teachers to the effect that form was premodern, irrelevant, and reactionary. As for the majority of young poets who were swept up in the post-Williams tide, a large number of them have grown into respected middle-aged poets—and, naturally, professors of creative writing—who are virtually incapable of writing in rhyme or meter, and who have passed their indifference to these skills along to their students. Many of these professor-poets have taken Williams's "no ideas but in things" doctrine as an authorization to set their minds aside when they write, and to celebrate as a philosophical virtue the intellectual vacuity, disunity, and self-indulgence of their own and their students' poems. Some of them, furthermore, taking their cue from Williams's most strictly descriptive poems, have made their reputations on unbearably monotonous verses that read like catalogues of plant names, land formations, and such; others, who trace their line of poetic descent back to Williams's "I kissed her while she pissed" mode, engage in relentlessly flat confession.

It is instructive simply to list the names of some of the now-venerated poets who began their careers as disciples of Williams. The members of the first wave—Louis Zukofsky,

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Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen—were associated with Williams from the 1930s on and called themselves Objectivists, attributing to Williams their preoccupation with physical objects and with the poem itself as an object. But it was a later group of disciples who began to spread Williams's fame, and to extend his influence, to the four corners of the earth. As late as 1945, Conrad Aiken had left Williams out of his *Modern Library Anthology of American Poetry*; five years later Williams had gathered into his fold the up-and-coming versifiers Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley, all of whom, within a few years, would be telling the world that Williams *was* American poetry. These young poets regarded Williams as a sort of spiritual father, the originator of ideas about poetry that seemed almost consonant with—that, indeed, seemed almost to confer a kind of legitimacy upon—their own unconventional approaches to the composition of verse.

A special case was that of Robert Lowell, who was more gifted by far than any of these other young poets. Lowell's splendid first book, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), had been written in a consummately Eliotic manner against which he was eager to rebel; Williams himself, in reviewing Lowell's second book, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), sensed the younger poet's restlessness: "Mr. Lowell appears to be restrained by the lines; he appears to *want* to break them." And break them he did: by the time *Mills* was published, Lowell had already been encouraged by the success of Ginsberg's own Williams-influenced manner to loosen up his lines and lower his level of diction; and over the course of the 1950s, driven by a legitimate need for a more flexible, colloquial manner, Lowell shifted away from Eliot's end of the modernist spectrum and toward Williams's. And what he ended up with, of course, was his 1959 volume *Life Studies,* in which he managed to manifest Williams's influence while writing a kind of poetry—direct, personal, and profoundly affecting—that was distinctly different from the Rutherford physician's.

The other young poets—Ginsberg, Olson, and Creeley—were a different story. At once tin-eared, uncerebral, and egomaniacal, all three had been on the lookout, in the early postwar years, for ways to turn their variously eccentric, radical, and narcissistic plaints into poems without the interposition of, well, any of that *poetry* stuff. They wanted to create poems that consisted of nothing but their voices, their vital spirits, confronting a blank page. To them, Williams was the ideal model, and his chatter about "no ideas but in things" and about poems as "fields of action" was right up their anti-intellectual alley. What separates Williams from these poets, however—and, for that matter, from most of the poets (though certainly not all) who claim him as their master—is that, in his own way, he believed in literary standards. He *had* standards, however ill-conceived they were, however incoherently explained, however ineffectively put into practice. Unlike many of his followers, he never behaved as if he thought that anything thrown on a page was poetry. If he didn't feel comfortable with the term "free verse," it was because to him it *wasn't* free; according to the poetics of an Allen Ginsberg, by contrast, poetry is not only free but licentious. It seems significant, in this connection, that though Williams enjoyed having disciples, Mariani notes that he privately found many of the younger poets woefully primitive, and that he described some Beat poems as "nutty experimentation."

Yet Williams, more than anyone else, was behind that nutty experimentation. Out of the work of his disciples grew the major American poetry movements of the postwar period: Ginsberg's Beats, Olson's Projectivists, Lowell's Confessional poets. To point this out is not to suggest that all the contemporary poets who have manifested Williams's influence are bad; but it does seem fair to say that the great majority of these poets who have made aesthetically successful use of his influence (Louis Simpson, for example) were first accomplished formal poets who brought to their free verse a sense of discipline that most of his followers have

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sorely lacked. To later generations of poets, indeed, Williams became the symbol of a number of related ideas which he would almost certainly have hated—namely, that anyone who can steal a pencil, a piece of paper, and a few moments alone in the corner of a coffeehouse is a poet; that one sincere poet is pretty much as good as another; that poetry is easy to do; that if you simply put the words down as they come to you, what you arrive at will be a poem; and that such a poem will be as valid as anything Keats or Browning or Shakespeare ever wrote—more valid, certainly, than anything so formal and polished, because it'll be *you* on that page and not some artificial arrangement of words.

The truth is that Williams, revolutionary though he was to the end of his days, was not quite the radical that many of his present-day followers would have him be. Williams read the classics; he believed that there was such a thing as an objectively good or bad poem; and though he allowed his words to pour "carelessly" onto the page, he fussed over those words, once they were in black and white, to make them—in his judgment—as good as possible. This is, by a considerable margin, the finer part of Williams's legacy—and the fact that it has been so blatantly ignored by so many of his self-styled disciples goes a long way, I think, toward explaining why young poets nowadays are, in increasing numbers, turning for inspiration and example not to Williams but to his old antagonist Eliot, and are again learning to work in those amaranthine forms that Williams spent a lifetime trying to bury.

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Discovering Degas
by James Lord

Edgar Degas was not afraid. He gazed into a mirror at age twenty and saw that the world in the future would look to him for a vision of creative rectitude and spiritual exaltation. So he sat down and painted a self-portrait in which, with penetrating candor and austere resolution, he depicted a person prepared to sacrifice his life for the mere privilege of making masterpieces. This poignant but proud and uncompromising image was the first work by Degas which waited to challenge the discernment of visitors to the vast retrospective exhibition that began its world tour at the Grand Palais in Paris this spring. The self-portrait told us that we were being introduced to greatness and that we would do well to scrutinize its handiwork with a diligence as rapt and humble as the artist's own. His courage consoled us while we reflected that its like seems to have vanished from the world.[1]

Every exhibition of international magnitude nowadays is meant to be all things to all people, especially to people newly recruited to the notion that aesthetic experience gives social grace. What is consequently wanted by curators and scholars, as well as by publicists and corporate patrons, is the exhibit that's definitive, a revelation of creative powers perceived entire for the first time, a cultural occasion long, long overdue. Degas gives everything that is wanted, gives it supremely, and gives it to such an extent that the dimensions of his own gift seem nearly limitless. The exhibition is immense, numbering almost four hundred works, and it had to be, for more than most artists Degas deserves the comprehensive view in order to prove the full point of genius. His early work is as indispensable as the late. Of how many great artists can that be clearly claimed? How many, indeed, can claim the clarity of greatness at all on the basis of their beginnings? To see Degas in the full, then, is an opportunity of surpassing moment. It has never been available before to this extent. It will never come again. This is literally the chance of a lifetime. It comes, moreover, at a time when its lesson—to be learned by all means in the very hardest way—may even save a few souls in peril of getting lost in the contemporary artistic wilderness.

What a surprise to discover that modernism starts with Degas! And all the while we'd thought that Cézanne, van Gogh, Monet, Seurat, even Gauguin were the ones who readied the diving board for the great

1 "Degas" was on view at the Grand Palais in Paris from February 9 through May 16, and at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Ottawa, Canada from June 16 through August 28. It will be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from October 11 through January 8. The exhibition was organized by Jean Sutherland Boggs, Henri Loyrette, Douglas W. Druick, Michael Pantazzi, and Gary Tinterow, all of whom contributed essays to the catalogue (600 pages, $50.95).

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plunge. They had the obvious influences, of course, but a radically original, authentically modern means of making images into works of art was already fully formed in the creations of Degas while all the others were still testing their talents. To be sure, he was older, far more precocious. He also had a gift for modesty and the wit to know that artistic consummation is not to be had through technical virtuosity. Above all, he had the strength of character to measure his progress according to the pitiless standard of tradition. No innovator of the modern era has known better than Degas what full resources for future originality could be gleaned from self-effacing concentration upon great attainments of the past. It was his luck, perhaps, to come along at just the right time; it was his genius to make the rightness of the time hinge upon his own imperious and fleeting vision of a world real to him only because his pictures looked like it.

The exhibition is organized chronologically with conventional deference to the punctilio of art history. While there is nothing adventuresome about this, and an opportunity for exciting juxtaposition is lost, it has the advantage of prompting a spectator to consider Degas's creative adventure as the literal record of a lifetime spent in the company of bankers, jockeys, and ballerinas. This advantage, needless to say, conceals rather than reveals the formal grandeur and revolutionary character of the artist's entire undertaking. That is all to the good. By knowing how to appear obvious and pleasing, Degas could grant himself the grueling luxury of being difficult and arcane. He understood that the public wants pictures, not art. Too proud to be vain, however, he insisted on offering both.

The early masterpieces are mostly portraits, several of himself, and especially the great group portrait of his aunt Laura, her husband Gennaro Bellelli, and their two young daughters and pet dog in an interior in Florence. So much has been said about this painting, its masterful architecture and technical brilliance, psychological penetration and spiritual dominion, that more comment seems impertinent. Save, perhaps, to suggest that only *Las Meninas* and Arnolfini hand-in-hand with his wife are comparably profound in their scrutiny of the ineffable interrelations between creative doing and being. In Degas's work the dog has been decapitated and a portrait of the painter's grandfather, parent of his principal model, stands in for the artist himself. This greatest creation of his youth, viewed with indifference when exhibited in 1867, was subsequently hidden away, even neglected and maltreated, for half a century by a man who was maniacal about the deference due to works of art.

Every artist has a secret. It is the cause and effect of both what he is and what he does. One might suppose that in proportion to his greatness, his work is invested with this secret. Not merely the enigma of genius, it is also the paradox of art itself, the puzzle of style and the conundrum of content. The artist never sees his own secret, though his lifework is devoted to disclosing it, and the deeper it lies buried the more difficult and diligent his labors are likely to become. Only in the very rarest of instances, of which I would not dare to suggest one, does some aesthetic-psychic Rosetta stone provide us with an opportunity for decipherment, and even then the mystery is deepened, while the dimension of art is extended, in the wild surmise of insight. Anybody seeking to discern Degas's secret will soon discover that he was not in love with laundresses, dancers, or racehorses. His tenderness went into his methods, his passion was spent on making them lifelike. Indefatigably inventive, eternally dissatisfied, he never ceased mixing media, reversing compositions, altering sizes, using his own work over and over to recreate itself.

To say that Degas was indifferent to his models, caring for them solely as raw material for the manufacture of art, has become virtually a platitude. He himself led people to assume so. Is it true? He was also prone to declare that art was a lie attired as truth.

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Then what stupendous verisimilitude he gave to the garb of falsehood! Pencil, pastel, charcoal, watercolor, oils, papers of variegated hue, cardboards, canvases—all these haphazard resources were pressed into service for composing the catalogue of his creative temperament. It is a famous fact that he used the influences of Ingres, the Renaissance masters, Japanese printmakers, and others in order wholly to assess his originality and explore his authenticity rather than to make a show of technical accomplishment. Look, for example, at the two celebrated dancing-class paintings of 1873-74. It is clear how spontaneously he made natural to himself whatever challenge he perceived in the art of others. His "naturalness," of course, was deliberately contrived, worked up in the studio by means of countless preparatory sketches, and the wonderful air of ease in the finished pictures is the product of painstaking self-discipline. The lie of art is a fabrication wrought from intransigent faith in the veracity of representation: the real thing is the creation.

Not in love with laundresses, milliners, ballerinas, Degas nonetheless felt a profound veneration for femininity and the female form. His art is suffused with it. A great lot of philistine nonsense has been written about his supposed misogyny, and it only goes to show yet again what careless looking and shabby thinking takes place in museums and universities. The fact is that we don't know enough about Degas's intimate existence to form any accurate judgment concerning his emotional disposition. He was certainly heterosexual; what he did about that as a man is unknown; what he did about it as an artist was to compose the grandest, most moving constellation of figures of women made by any painter of modern times, including Renoir, including even Matisse. Only a fool could contemplate the great, late series of female bathers, marvelously represented in this exhibition, without seeing supreme benevolence and compassion. What a lesson in looking at humanity! His secret saved Degas from sinking into facile sentiment; but it did not prevent him from measuring the deepest depths of emotion.

If Degas kept himself to himself, he did not keep sexuality out of his work. One picture, indeed, the famous *Interior* of 1869, may be said to picture the very prospect of intercourse without representing anything in the least sexual, save what a spectator naturally assumes to be basic between man and woman, and though there is no evidence to suggest such an inference, this painting has often been called *The Rape*. However titillating it might be today to indulge in assumptions, Degas took fastidious care to refrain from any mix of the erotic with the aesthetic, and preserved his genius from demeaning identification of private pleasure with public gratification.

The female nude is the most ancient, most important, most serious subject in art. Degas never let it down. Even in the monotypes of whorehouse scenes not a trace of prurience or condescension is visible, and yet the exhibition catalogue suggests that the artist interpreted this subject matter with sardonic detachment. To me, these little pictures look like great expressions of tenderness and compassion, and we must remember that monotypes are products of the artist's studio, never dashed off on the spot. Degas's whorehouse compositions have none of the documentary character of those recorded by Toulouse-Lautrec a decade later. Prostitutes were à la mode with artists of that day. Zola and Maupassant, not to mention Baudelaire, wrote about them, and Manet's most famous painting depicted one. Degas made some monotypes; whether he visited brothels we do not know. Besides, the real-life morality of the women represented as goddesses by Rembrandt and Rubens, by Titian, Tintoretto, and Bellini, is a matter of which our ignorance is both bliss and virtue. Degas definitely did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and therefore his recorded remarks seeming to suggest dislike or distrust of women should be considered with reserve. He was famous for sarcasm, which is often the expedient of an exacerbated sensibility. At all events, the truth is in the art.

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Degas was a man about town and a man very much of his own time. The advanced taste of the day no longer relished historical, allegorical subject matter. Connoisseurs, persuaded by the powerful scenes of contemporary life painted by men like Courbet, Millet, and Daumier, looked for works in which they could recognize the settings and people of the world in which they lived. Thus, the Impressionists were as much the product of the right time as they were the creators of it. Degas was an enthusiastic, militant Impressionist, active in organizing exhibitions and in programming careers, including his own. He met regularly with his colleagues in their favorite cafés to talk theory, argue strategy, and banter about reputations. And yet he was a very unorthodox Impressionist, working almost never in the open air, depicting landscapes rarely, and invariably subdued in his rendition of atmospheric effects. His subject matter nonetheless was quite as contemporary as the Moulin de la Galette or the Gare St. Lazare. But his treatment of it was formal, objective, determined by classical criteria of composition while at the same time challenging academic conventions and never lapsing into the facile delectation of anecdote. What appears most spontaneous and even cursory in Degas is always the product of studied application. Though his "articles," as he called them, were made to be immediately pleasing, they were always meant to summon scrupulous analogy to the art of museums. In this, though in almost nothing else, he was akin to his only peer in modern times, Paul Cézanne, whose art he admired, understood, and collected.

A social-economic-political approach to Degas's art is the most arid and profitless itinerary conceivable, and one which we know he would have held in bitter contempt. Nevertheless, it has lately become fashionable to try to interpret masterpieces as products of definable sociological conditions and to analyze artists as beings in spiritless thrall to the tyranny of cultural determinism. This deplorable trend—which makes no allowance for the solitary, arduous, spiritual travail of the creative life—would vitiate the very idea of an attainment so noble and rare that it presupposes faculties superior to those of the multitude. Consequently we must be prepared to hear not only about Degas's alleged misogyny but also about his anti-Semitism, his money troubles, his bourgeois mentality, and his conservative social and political opinions. All of this, to be sure, has an interest, but that interest is exterior and superficial, because we simply do not know enough about Degas's inner life to translate interest into understanding. He was the servant of his secret, but he came to a very comfortable, luxurious accommodation with that servitude and invited nobody else into its confines. Despite all their preoccupation with facts and data, art historians have yet to give us a conclusive biography of Degas. His self-portraits tell more about him than anything ever written, and yet he stopped portraying himself forty years before he stopped painting. Why? The saving grace of genius allows essential questions to remain unanswered.

It is clear that, in the context of the Dreyfus Affair, Degas adopted a fiercely anti-Semitic stance, and this has been regarded as a symptom of moral imperfection so grave that it must somehow taint his art. No enlightened person likes racism, but in the horrific modern world racial facts have become those of life—or death—as never before, and no honest person can pretend to be utterly dispassionate, whether the issue be black, white, yellow, sexual, theological, or simply political. In Degas's case, the important question is whether the fervor of art transcends, or perhaps even sublimates, these troublesome passions. In any event, it seems odd that Degas should be blamed still today for taking a stand taken also by Cézanne, who has never been blamed for it, or, indeed, for hiding from military service while Degas, though too old, and Manet, even older, volunteered for the defense of besieged Paris. Is it possible that Cézanne was deemed too "important," too "influential," to be held morally accountable? Nobody now bothers about Caravaggio's mis-

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behavior. As it was, Degas asked for no excuse. His creations, vividly contemporary in subject matter as they are, depict nothing of the turbulent events and overwrought opinions of his time, which is all to their good, and to ours.

Degas had trouble with his eyesight, but his vision never failed him until the inconveniences and afflictions of old age made it, so to speak, superfluous. Like Cézanne, Degas grew greater as he grew older, never ceasing to search for ampler, more difficult, more original means of representing scenes and themes he had labored over almost from the beginning. His late bathers are perfectly equivalent in aesthetic grandeur and emotional power to the views of the Mont Sainte-Victoire. They possess the monumental pathos and dignity of the sculpture from the Parthenon pediments. To see the full, dramatic, audacious accomplishment of Degas's maturity, to work up to it, so to speak, via the chronological route of this magnificent exhibition, is to perceive for the first time that the irascible but sociable Parisian bourgeois was no less radical in his innovations than the reclusive, uncouth, moody master of Aix-en-Provence. Both extended the range of pictorial expression by revising entirely the concept of what could be achieved on a plane surface by way of realistic representation; at the same time, both re-affirmed classical criteria of composition and renewed the projection of emotional constituents to such a degree that their culminating creations attained the tragic and sublime intensity of the Old Masters they had admired in their youth. This kind of fulfillment, of course, is a terrible test of character, but neither Cézanne nor Degas asked or expected anyone else to join in the quest for understanding. They knew that it would lead them to the cemetery, and the knowledge went serenely into their masterpieces. Things were the same for Rembrandt, to be sure, and Titian, and Goya. Likewise Beethoven, for that matter, and Balzac, and the author of *The Tempest*.

To the young painters of my acquaintance in Paris, those, say, under forty, the Degas exhibition has come as a stunning revelation, something new, absolute, imperative, something that can show, as Degas himself so thoroughly understood, how the old lessons always have surprising verities to reveal. Just when it seemed that everyone knew everything worth knowing about modern art, a major illumination comes from a source that is supposed to be entirely familiar and transfigures the aspect of both future and past. Isn't it astonishing, for example, to look at the late dancers and bathers and to see so much of what had appeared unique to Francis Bacon already brilliantly realized by Degas, and without Bacon's parody of psychological self-revelation or his macabre facility? How firmly Degas leaves "finish" to the viewer's eye and proceeds with the abstruse business of establishing a style and disciplining a vision!

Degas's command of his resources became more complete, consequently more free, as he saw with greater difficulty, just as Beethoven's mastery of the audible grew more acute as he lost his hearing. Though with one exception Degas never exhibited a piece of sculpture during his lifetime, he executed more than a hundred and fifty, and those that survive also illustrate a willingness to take aesthetic risks so impetuous and yet so temperate that in his careful daring he looks like an artist who never made a mistake. To today's young artists the example, the challenge, the revelation of Degas may be a bit discouraging. He, after all, in his youth had had Ingres, whom he met, as a living link with a tradition he revered, and in his maturity had Manet, Cézanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin—to name only the most celebrated—as colleagues whose company he enjoyed, insofar as genius can enjoy company, and whose works he bought and lived with. Who today can exercise the moral authority or set the spiritual precedent of a Matisse or a Giacometti? Highest aspiration craves the coexistence of persons of highest attainment. Is it invidious to ask who such persons at present might be? I can't think of a single one.

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To devise a valid verbal equivalent of visual experience is, needless to say, impossible. The triumph of art is to defy definition and to confound analysis even as it compels an ecstatic desire to participate in its mystery. Degas provides an unparalleled opportunity to venture upon this treacherous terrain. For most people the current Degas exhibition will offer pictorial pleasure of supreme refinement, and that is a great deal. For those few, however, who have the heart and the nerve and the stamina to look at works of art in their secretive solitude and try to discern the human dimension which is intrinsic to them, the artistic adventure of the Degas exhibition will eventually offer a prodigious apprehension of creative courage. The artist's secret, like that of all creation, is frightening as well as fascinating; and an essential part of an artist's greatness will be to demonstrate that, without ever understanding what he does, he is not afraid of what he can do. Edgar Degas was not afraid.

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The canon under siege

by Mark Helprin

Not too long after the Second World War, I was a student in a day school in the Hudson Valley, a virtual paradise on an estate of about fifty acres overlooking the river at a point that many of its painters have memorialized in some of the best paintings America has ever seen. There I was, in this verdant place, not even ten years old, learning my lessons, returning each night to my family. From May through September we would sit outside every evening on a brick terrace under an enormous magnolia and have tea until darkness closed in. What a wealth of hours I spent with my father, talking about every subject known to man, and how easily I spent it, considering what I know now and what I would do, if I could, to bypass the laws of nature just to have a minute with him.

On the playing fields of this school we learned nearly every team sport in existence, courtesy of a short ex-Marine whom we called Coach, a good man, perhaps not too bright, but a superb athlete who never understood that when we addressed him we had secretly in mind something with four wheels and a highly shellacked door that closed with a deep click. Perhaps because he had been a Marine (we could without fear of retribution say to his face, "You are marine"), he had an exquisite array of creative punishments. Most of these involved agonizing calisthenics or wearing underwear on your head or running at high speed on all fours up and down the halls of the school. But if you went beyond the pale, you were in real trouble, for then you had either to "run the gauntlet" or "stay the circle." The first of these tortures involved running down a corridor formed by a double line of boys, every one of whom had a license to hit or kick you as hard as he could. The second required of you that you stay within a small chalk circle as the entire group of athletes, one at a time, dashed into it and delivered a blow, and then dashed out beyond retaliation.

We played lacrosse and ice hockey with hardly any protection, so cuts and bruises were not unknown to us: the terror of the punishment lay not so much in the pain as in the expressions of one's classmates as they attacked. Though friends only tapped you, and people you didn't know well were mainly indifferent, enemies, it seemed, would try to kill you. Anyway, the gauntlet and the circle were rare events—until a new boy came to us from a DP camp in Eastern Europe. His English was poor, he had been put back two or three grades, and he was a bully. Gauntlet and circle became his almost daily lot. He had been lucky to join us after an evolution of sorts, in which at least half the boys would only tap the victim, because we realized that we were getting bigger and could actually do some harm, and because it seemed dishonorable to strike someone who was forbidden to strike back.

At that time my father returned from England with a book by Lord Russell of Liverpool subtitled *A Short History of Nazi War*

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Crimes. Books in English on the holocaust were slow in coming. This was one of the first. It was possible to imagine that the DP child had undergone all the tortures documented in the book, but, then again, since he had been only two or three years of age when the war ended, perhaps he had not. However, upon further inquiry we were told that, yes, he had been born in a camp, and, yes, his parents had been taken from him, after which he had spent most of his life behind barbed wire.

Inevitably the time came for the next punishment of the DP child (his name was almost impossible to pronounce). I refused. That in itself was dangerous, but though I was just a boy, my resolution had been steeled in the pages of Lord Russell's book. A friend of mine with a reputation for cowardice immediately joined me. He was physically weak, not much of a fighter, not much of a runner, and therefore he had little chance of escape. Such is the value of reputation. Faced with this blatant rebellion, the coach ordered the two of us into the circle. We refused. Then he lost his temper, Marine style. Though he was really a fine man and would never have hurt us, we weren't sure of that at the time, and all I remember is running through dense woods that went past in a rapid blur. After speeding through abundant obstructions, I ended up under a log that spanned a brook, breathing like someone with emphysema and staring at a stream of silver water pouring from the fissures in some mossy black rocks.

I hardly slept that night, planning my escape into the forest should the coach try to kill me, but the next day nothing happened. The coach seemed to have forgotten the rebellion, and the DP child continued to bully everyone. He even bullied my brave friend. Nothing had changed. The DP child, however, soon left, for he had too much sorrow to live among happy children, and the gauntlet and the circle seemed to go with him.

Though not expecting it, I grew up. Since the days on the athletic field surrounded by apple blossoms and beech trees, I myself have seen something of war, death, and camps. I have my own children now. I try to do the right thing. Not long after the events described I began to develop a deep love for what is unfortunately called literature, a terrible name that sounds affected and pretentious. If you didn't know the word you might guess that it was a surgical technique or an ancient technical term for part of a thatched roof, not the one word for language that can be as beautiful and hypnotic as song, for a vast summing up, in precious few words, of all that is truly important. It includes snowstorms and sunlit forests preserved in their fullness and depth by a miraculous series of codes that are of such great effect that they can often be more intense than the things they describe. It represents the extraordinary courage of a sole human voice confronting death, preserving life beyond its term, standing alone, speaking for as long as the code is conserved, even to others who have not yet been born. Is it not astounding that one can love so deeply characters who are composites, portraits, or born of the thin air, especially when one has never seen or touched them, and they exist only in an imprint of curiously bent lines?

To make a more concise argument, one lives for a very short time, and life is incomparably precious. To live has much less to do with the senses or with ambition than with the asking of questions that have never been surely answered. To ask and then to answer these questions as far as one can one needs above all a priceless and taxing involvement with truth and beauty. These are uncommonly plentiful in music and painting, in nature itself, in the sciences, in history, and in one's life as it unfolds—if one labors and dares to see them. But nowhere do they run together with such complexity and power as in the gracefully written word. It is not, as so many people mistake it, an element of manners, a cultural obligation, a diversion, or a means of opening the conversation at dinner parties. I have devoted my life to it not because I thought it would be

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a good way to earn money or because I thought it might be pleasant and interesting, but, rather, because I love it—and I love it not only because it is so pleasingly beautiful but because it is so deeply consequential.

And now, like the DP child staying the circle, it is under siege, not just from one quarter, but from many. But only temporarily, for its lasting power is well known. It has come under siege before, in ways that make the present seem quite serene: in the Middle Ages, under totalitarian oppression, and by neglect. It suffers casualties continuously. For every Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville rescued from oblivion, how many dozen others remain unknown? And eventually, though literature itself continues, everyone is forgotten after his time. But just as life is certainly worth defending even though it must end in death, so this art and craft, fleeting in detail but everlasting nonetheless, is worth a great deal of effort to preserve from afflictions and assaults that, though they are ugly, are sure to be burnt off the landscape by any one of an infinite number of rising suns.

The role of maneuver and force in war and nature is approximated in universities by that of opinion. Instead of divisions of soldiers on the march, or storms impacting on a beach, academia has the struggle of opinions. Though the truth in opinion can be supported, even in the most objective departments of the sciences it is seldom self-evident enough not to require for its acceptance an organized coercion manifested in various collective or social mechanisms. To be certified in academia, you must learn how to change your ideas under pressure. Unfortunately, this often leaves a desire for revenge. Though many cannot bear to suffocate in factories of intellectualism, and choose instead the exhilarating anarchy of nature, commerce, or even the army (all in all, a lot freer), others choose to become permanent inhabitants of one or another splendid academic asylum.

The generation now beginning to dominate departments within the university has been subject to unusual pressures that have not found relief. They had a war with which to contend, but because most of them did not actually experience it, they never were allowed a catharsis. Indeed, the war was the kind of war that did not allow a catharsis even to those who did experience it. And lost wars are never over. In addition, this generation accepted some shameless flattery about itself and set out to remake the world. A newspaper article recently questioned the fate of the Chinese Red Guards. Where are they? In remote communes? Hidden in the warrens of Shanghai? Tending goats on the Mongolian border? Who knows? Our own wrathful idealists have never really changed their address. They are right where they started, in the universities, and a few of them, absent the test of experience on the outside, seem to have lost some of their marbles.

Their operations of late in many a department of literature have been to muscle aside the aging and increasingly isolated traditionalists—most of whom probably did not join English faculties with the expectation of or preparation for Leninist political combat—for the purpose of re-defining literature and warring against the canon of familiar works rather than gently modifying it as has been the practice literally for ages. The irony of their assault against what they would have us believe is a literary bastille is that no canon actually exists. Until recently no comprehensive definition of literary excellence has been in force, and works have found their way to and from reading lists rather freely and without restraint. In the guise of tearing down a bastille, the revisionists are actually raising their own, for they have a definite and particular notion of what makes literary excellence, and theirs is not a temperament to allow anarchy but rather to accomplish purges.

Lest the reader think this imagined, consider that in a *New York Times* article, from which the title of this essay was adapted, Joseph Berger reports that "a rising group . . . contends that the idea of an enduring pantheon of writers and their works is an

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elitist one largely defined by white men," and that this school has "now begun to question the very idea of literary quality and has made for the teaching of writers principally for historical and sociological importance."

The measure of historical and sociological importance has led many professors, according to David Brooks, writing in *The Wall Street Journal,* to de-emphasize what they call "'the phalluscentric canon,' in favor of books by women, preferably black women." That is why Christopher Clausen of Pennsylvania State University is willing to bet that "*The Color Purple* is taught in more English courses today than all of Shakespeare's plays combined." Brooks quotes a Wesleyan University professor who maintains that traditional reading lists exist "to conceal the real workings of society from those most hurt by it," and that this is adjunct to "a much broader social strategy" of the "professional-managerial class."

Not surprisingly, people who view literature as a tool of oppression (or, at best, a weapon against it), rather than as an impartial phenomenon that addresses essential questions beyond and apart from politics, are obsessed with structure and control. Like good urban guerrillas, they go for the "heart of the beast." Of course, they are not really interested in literature at all. Departments, institutes, journals, associations, salaries, and petty powers are their real interests and targets. They strive most of all for positions of authority—and they are succeeding, as in comic opera, a coup in a banana republic, or the internecine strife of a mental institution. This despite the fact that literature is one of the most vital and anarchic forces the world knows, and attempting to make it an ideological slave is impossible in the long run.

But they try. At Stanford the campus has been riven by a movement to jettison "traditional" works and replace them with those by "women, minorities, and people of color." The standard proposed is by no means unusual, and is based upon the assumption that a book can be judged by the race, sex, or ethnicity of its author. This presupposes that a black woman, for example, is unable to find anything of lasting value in Shakespeare, because he was a white man (or, as they say at Stanford, a "white male," since a man is a male and a woman is a woman), though it does not necessarily presuppose, of course, that a "white male" cannot find anything of value in the work of a black woman. Anyway, since Shakespeare was a white male, does it not make perfect sense that his place on a reading list should be given to a black woman? The Stanford militants express this view because, they assert, black women are a minority *in California,* and a minority's claim is always more deserving than that of the majority. Even if one crosses one's eyes and accepts this argument, some quick arithmetic will show that since one third of Californians are nonwhite, and one half of the whites are female, then white males—Shakespeares—make up only one third of the population, whereas "women, minorities, and people of color" make up two thirds. That's right, you will be told, the minority is the majority, which vastly strengthens its claim. Bye-bye, Shakespeare, white male.

What is the salient characteristic of Galileo? That he perceived the workings of celestial mechanics and stood his ground (up to a point)? No. He was a white male. What about Dante? Was it his vision of the world, his inimitable poetry? No. He too was a white male. And what about the Bible, that book in the drawers of chipboard tables in motels? *White males.*

Even if the world were nothing more than a struggle between classes, might the revisionist scholars be willing to concede the existence, somewhere, somehow, of universal and eternal truths that may be apprehended and conveyed without reference to race, sex, and economics? They will not, and they cannot, any more than a machine can tell you what it feels like to have a soul.

Perhaps because they themselves cannot comprehend the standards of the "canon," much less meet them, the revisionists have decided upon new criteria, which derive

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from a totalitarian political bent and are some of the many unsolicited gifts of Marxism's inability to limit its mania for explanation. The formula is something like "numbers of oppressed group times extent of oppression equals merit." Mind you, the operational definitions of these terms are not decided disinterestedly, since the people who credit the formula are capable neither of disinterestedness nor of allowing that it exists. Their equation is convenient in pandering for support, and it snaketails quite nicely into a certain historical moment, as it is predicated on the belief that questions are best answered not by investigation but by decree.

Not only do they absurdly attempt to define merit by counting heads, but the cadres of politicized aesthetes seem to have forgotten entirely the roles of necessity and coercion (though they speak of them all the time) within the classes that they profess to champion. In their thinking, canned spaghetti would be superior to, let us say, a butterflied, marinated, charcoal-broiled leg of lamb, because the former is more familiar to "the masses." In proceeding to this conclusion *a posteriori,* they have exhibited no curiosity about what most people might choose were the choice open. In fact, the oppressed to whom they have assigned the role of arbiter of tastes and for whom they have done away with the notion of detachment are much better attuned to the objective than are they. A Vietnamese boat person with a cardboard suitcase and a pot full of fish heads is just as capable of objectivity as an English peer with a bridle leather attaché case and a bone china plate of caviar-stuffed prawns. Boat person and peer will choose and reject similarly, for the qualities of merit lie in the objects themselves rather than in the circumstances of those who perceive them. Bridle leather wears better, smells better, and feels better than cardboard (at least as a suitcase). The meat of a prawn tastes better than eyes, cartilage, and gills. And so on and so forth. Perhaps the revisionist cadres in the academic fun house, singing the praises of cardboard suitcases and fish heads, would be surprised if the people to whom they pander turned on them for the crime of romanticizing their disabilities and misfortunes, which is nothing more, really, than offering them a boot and a heel. Why teach Shakespeare to the children of poor non-English-speaking immigrants who are not even accustomed to the Roman alphabet? Can they have anything in common with him? In fact, the revisionists themselves, obsessed with shallow categorizations of the human soul, are probably the only people who share nothing in common with Shakespeare. What a shame that, having failed to take over the world, they should march on English departments.

To make literature the servant of politics has been the familiar task of Stalinism, fascism, Nazism, or the kind of Third World adaptation resulting in children's texts that read, "If three imperialists are riding down the street and you kill two, how many are left to be killed by other oppressed children struggling for their inalienable rights?" The totalitarian impulse to interpret absolutely every facet of life as part of a grand struggle for power always runs together with comic pettiness and stupidity. Perhaps one should expect this in certain quarters, but that this spore can thrive in an open society is disturbing and disheartening. Though its existence, too, will burn away in the sunshine, it is a blow nonetheless.

One of the best things about writing and writers is the affinity of the profession and its adherents to anarchy and individualism. Unlike human behavior in a political context, the imagination is speculative. Though much may flow from it that needs regulation lest it assault the structure of everyday life, artistic expression itself need never be subject to bureaucratic control. Though angered and saddened by licentiousness, one must still look with favor upon the tendency of Anglo-American jurisprudence to allow virtually no restraint upon the printed word. Literary anarchy is good because a good writer addresses questions over which no human authority can ever hold sway, and

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therefore he must be able to resist the organizational impulse that gives rise to ministries of culture, writers' unions, academies, and cliques.

But the schools, the cliques, and their supportive apparatus appear to be riding a wave. The social impulse, no matter how lamentable in this field, is just as potent within it as it is in other areas: an order of battle can be formidable in itself, apart from its elements. Other factors as well have contributed to the success of the collective impulse. An economy far richer and more specialized than ever before in history has made possible the existence of unprecedented numbers of professional writers. That in turn has led to writing schools tucked in odd corners of the universities. Nothing is wrong with writing programs except their central premise. It is simply not possible to teach someone to write. You may offer a refuge for a time, but why not just give out vouchers for a good hotel in Venice? To teach writing in classes and seminars makes as much sense as trying to teach someone to be an adventurer. The drive must come from within, and the territory of operations must be uncharted: there is no teaching this. Though writing schools are largely innocent of harmful effect, they may be part of the reason for the malignant presence of schools of writing. A school befits many things—painting, music, fish—better than it does literature. At best it may exemplify a grand coincidence of motives and sensibilities. At worst it is a kind of fraternal order or academy, the purpose of which is to close out the unconnected, dominate the discipline, and grease the founders and caretakers. My advice to a writer about to become part of a school is to join the League of Women Voters. Writers should stand alone like oaks rather than wired together in bales like sprigs of hay.

No better illumination of the pitfalls of the collective impulse exists than the school of the minimalists. What they do is as bad as what they believe in. They appear to start from the premise that the world has unjustly offended their innate virtue and forced them to become trenchant, impassive observers of its universal offensiveness. They have little to do except document the pathos and idiocy of those unintelligent enough not to have been offended, or chronicle the lives of the offended and enlightened who seem to live mainly in diners and trailers. They have taken their stylistic cue from the haiku, and they worship spare strokes. Their novels are novellas, their novellas vignettes, and their short stories laboratory experiments in subliminal perception (I refer not to length but depth). Though the intent of minimalism may be to convey a great deal on the lightest possible frame, one has to have some bulk for the publishers. Ten thousand words are ten thousand words, but, as if to camouflage the swelling, the minimalists gut the content. This is an unconscious error comparable to that of the man who wanted to travel light and packed a peanut in a steamer trunk. Though minimalist "classics" usually are fairly brief (even if not brief enough), they lend themselves to the short form not because they are poignant but because they are anaerobic. If one of these lightless artifacts, completely without oxygen, were stretched into a novel, reading it would be like driving from Miami to San Francisco while holding your breath.

In their approach, the adherents of minimalism are almost uniformly oblique, which is not surprising, since the uncomprehending often crave inscrutability as a shield behind which nothing can be something. Beyond that, we have in their inscrutability a clue that theirs is more a social than a literary movement. Subcultures develop, want, and need dialects as part of their identity, their defense, and their mechanism for sustaining an elite (those who best master the intricacies of the dialect). The dialect of the minimalists is their affectation of inscrutability and exhaustion. It is also their mask. Mice who tour lion country need masks and other tricks to have a safe trip. Besides, their unwillingness to deal with life other than obliquely is not subtlety, as they would have you think, but cowardice. And they aren't

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even oblique as much as they are simply sarcastic and snotty. I wonder if, in other civilizations, priestly castes and philosophers are elevated and revered because they are snotty.

Minimalists appear to be people who have not been forced to struggle, and who have not dared upon some struggle to which they have not been forced. Thus, they have contempt for their own lives of mild discomfort—and who can blame them? They live in a strange, motionless, protected world. In the world to which they are deaf you can always be overwhelmed; thieves and murderers can strike in the night; you can find yourself, head shaved clean, in a prison camp; the people you love die, and you don't take it lightly or think it is ironic; you are not sure of the next meal, of the absence of terror, or of safety, comfort, or abundance, for you have learned that these things, far from being the state to which an unabused universe automatically reverts, are merely illusions waiting to be shattered by suffering and mortality. And because of this, or at least in conjunction with it, visions are intense, things are important, love is deep, life overflows. But they observe everything of great moment as if from a distance, as if it were in miniature, or under glass, as if when you pricked them they would not bleed. Whence comes their sang-froid, their gluttonous pursuit of irony, their unlikely detachment in regard to love and death? (Yeats's epitaph is remarkable precisely because it is an admonition he did not honor.) Perhaps these qualities arise not in the great truth they have pretended to discover (that life is ugly and uninteresting) but rather in the fact that they don't put themselves at risk, they don't (to paraphrase Joyce) fail, fall, or feel. What are they doing with characters that chafe a million square miles of ass-leather on diner banquettes and vinyl-covered kitchen chairs? It is really quite simple. They are sitting out all the dances.

Not only do they abstain, they have made a virtual industry out of ridicule. And what do they ridicule? Effort, perfection, devotion, fidelity, honor, belief, love, bravery, et al. Please allow the following digression. In 1976 I arrived at Magdalen College, Oxford, as a rather old postgraduate student under Hugh Trevor-Roper, intending, among other things, to train on the Isis for four years and row in the 1980 Olympics. But it rained all the time and I got very depressed living on a turkey farm where I witnessed a terrible murder and then nearly being hit by a suicide falling from the clock tower outside All Souls library, and witnessing two steeplejacks plunge from an enormously high cooling structure as I rode past on the train to London. It was always cloudy, and I discovered a miraculous English cookie that has chocolate chips and fruit and is yet so crisp that eating it is like cracking nuts. I often found myself in the boat house, pretending to wait out a cold rain, excerpting a cookie or two from the week's supply that I attempted to carry home nearly every day. Then I would have another two. Then the entire package, then another package, and another, and, quite apart from putting on weight, the river there is so crooked and narrow and filled with swans and covered with bridges upon which stand hoodlums who pour beer on your head as you row underneath that I didn't do as much rowing as I planned, and never would have gotten to the 1980 Olympics even had the Russians not invaded Afghanistan. But I do not, now that I have failed and am over the hill, mock young oarsmen who can propel their light boats as I never could. I do not refuse to credit their will and devotion, or reason that because I was not able to keep my vows, realize my intent, and follow my ideals, that vows, plans, and ideals are contemptible. The minimalists do, however, and it has become the fashion. In addition, they have etched into the surface of literary life a number of other strange conventions that are no less mysterious than they are distorted.

Their characters always seem to have a health problem (in addition to the nicotine addiction and alcoholism that are de rigueur) that is far more disgusting than perilous. How so many people can be sitting in so many diners, trailers, and pickup trucks with

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so many ingrown toenails, varicose veins, corns, bunions, boils, warts, skin infections, impetigo, itches, scars, blackheads, and scabs is the secret of the Sphinx. This school of writers does not require literary critics as much as dermatologists. Someday they will discover tropical medicine:

> The kitchen in my trailer is covered with coffee stains. Across 203, the lights of the diner sign blink on and off. Marlene goes, you get jealous when I have coffee with people who have malaria. I go, no I don't. She goes, the Pork Tapeworm, Taeniarhynchus solium, is covered with a tough cuticle. She takes a drag on her cigarette and inspects her varicose veins, and then she goes, now why is that? I go, I don't know, why do some women have teased hair? She goes, you never talk to me. I go, right, let's talk. Let's talk about Cestoda Platyhelminthes and nematodes. Marlene gets like this, ever since I had the affair with the waitress in Butlersville, the one with the tapeworm that drove my pickup the wrong way on I-80.

The landscape of American literature is now littered with similar paragraphs, not because they reflect a compelling reality but because they reflect a particular vision that has been institutionalized. The conventions that flow from this absurd vision are nearly ubiquitous. Of one hundred stories that I recently read for the purpose of gathering twenty for an anthology, more than a third dealt with divorce, separation, or extramarital affairs. Alcohol appeared in more than half, cigarettes and coffee in more than a third, brand names in about a third, and that satanic square that I can hardly bear to mention, television, in more than half. Only one story in six managed to avoid altogether these useless touchstones of American fiction. Whereas the appearance of these elements need not have any bearing on the quality of a story, still, it is tiring to travel in a land where the trees and mountains have been entirely replaced by vinyl-covered kitchen chairs.

Why are so many minimalist stories about despicable people in filthy unkempt garden apartments filled with ugly bric-a-brac, where everyone smokes, drinks, stays up all night, and is addicted to coffee? Why are the characters almost uniformly pudgy, stiff, and out of shape, even if they are in their twenties? Why do they watch so much television? Why do they have so many headaches? Why are they impotent, frigid, promiscuous, or all three combined? Why are their lives intertwined inextricably with brand names? Why are almost all of them divorced, never married, or, if married, remembering, having, or about to have an affair? Why is their hair dirty? Why don't they work at a profession or a trade? What are they doing in university towns in their middle age? Why do they seem to exist as if there were no landscape, or as if they were living in tunnels underground? Is that why they are never sunburned? Why are they never in love (their extramarital affairs have less to do with love than with exploration and injury) or involved in something that scares the death out of them? Why do they behave as if they are going to live forever and every moment will be a curse, rather than as if they are going to live for only a very short time and every moment will be a blessing?

This is probably not a reflection of the world that most people know—a world of real danger, real tragedy, real beauty, and real love. It may of course have something to do with who writes the stories and who now reads them. Though I feel that I have intruded upon a closed system, I do not hesitate to report on it, because my anxiety over the possible consequences to my livelihood (no matter, judging from my mail, most of my readers are in Trondheim and Antwerp) is dwarfed by my wonder at what I have seen. In the tunnels of contemporary American literature, the moles are singing. They are singing in unison, they are singing to each other, and they are singing of the darkness. Far be it from me to criticize some who are my colleagues. That would be dangerous. And it would be impolitic. But, then again, literature is not politics. Or is it?

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Poems *by Elizabeth Spires & Jeffrey Harrison*

Victoriana: gold mourning pendant with an eye painted on ivory

Who made this thing?
An eye staring
without blinking,
laid down on the dead

white of ivory by paint
and brush, pearls ringing
the pendant's oval as if
grief could be transformed

into a cold and costly
object. How calmly the eye
contemplates the scenes
put before it: my birth,

a tear in time's fabric
I crawled through quickly,
headfirst, quickly forgetting
the blood, the pain, the lights.

Halfway into my journey,
the cold wind of coincidence
throwing my shadow against yours
to meet and marry for life.

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And the deaths in a line
on the horizon, black
silhouettes waving to us,
though we don't wave back.

An eye that sees too much
and yet sees nothing.
Why do I hate it so,
hate the artist who

would work the body into
a relic of hair and ivory,
who, in love's memory,
would pluck the eye

from the socket,
leaving the living
model blind in one eye?
I will turn from the art

of eyepainting, so distant
from hands, lips, heart.
Until we die, we live
in an everlasting present

of physicality that feels
things blindly, inch by inch,
by sense, by sound, by fingertips.
Let the dead learn from us.

—Elizabeth Spires

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Rosa Tacchini

11.22.1872

Hides, horns, hooves, tallow, wool:
the commerce of the world drives men, takes lives.
Homeward bound, from Buenos Aires to Italy,
the ocean our glittering toy, we were dragged
from St. Mary's Roadstead by a gale, just off
the Scilly Isles, success turning on our lips
as good wine turns to bad in the unreasoning bottle.
Paper was our downfall, we struck the Paper Ledge,
I at the bow, the blind eyes in my head
responsible. Washed up near Carn Near,
I lay with the years, my beauty going
quickly, as yours will, weather coarsening
my fine features into wind-roughened wood.
Come closer. Read me with fingers.
Learn by looking in my eyes how elements
conspire to drag the living down to never-to-be
fathomed depths and give new life to the dead.
I am fixed on a thin horizon, my punishment
to see now what I didn't see then. Forever will I live
on this windswept, tropical isle, buoys ringing
in my head, signalling rocks and shallows
I must watch out for. I am still changing!
Who speaks to you from dark depths?
Whose voice enchants and holds you, as innocent
beauty can't, in a briny net woven out of hardship?
It is I, the daughter of time.

(Tresco Island)

—Elizabeth Spires

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The clearing

I leave the trail, cut through the woods,
and come to a bright clearing,
its long grass luminous with dew
and steaming—and everywhere, between
the trees and bushes, spider webs,
staring like weird translucent eyes
(the spiders are the pupils).

A rotten tree trunk waves a flag
of mist as thick as smoke.
Lichen, the gray snow of decay,
splotches the scraggly branches
of dead spruces. And a few
dying maples and birches lean.
It's all barely held together

by this secret structure that the dew
reveals, the otherwise invisible
threads that pull the foliage back
to make this opening. Break one
and the whole thing could collapse.
All eyes are on me.
I must be careful walking through.

—Jeffrey Harrison

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Art

William Tucker's American decade

by Eric Gibson

The Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, is something of an annual pilgrimage point for aficionados of modern sculpture, not to mention ordinary art lovers wanting a day in the country. Located in the Hudson Valley about two hours northwest of Manhattan, Storm King is a former private residence turned outdoor sculpture museum. A Norman-style building sits amid four hundred acres of gently undulating terrain. It's a sort of Brobdingnagian version of MOMA's sculpture garden, but with the Modern's catholic taste exchanged for a concentration on constructed sculpture. Noguchi, Moore, and Hepworth may be in evidence, but they only highlight the preponderance of Smith, di Suvero, and, lately, Calder.

It is a splendid anomaly: a major museum positioned off the beaten track and devoted to exhibiting outdoors a form of art not known for its affinity with nature. Yet there's a rightness about the place. Each piece of sculpture is so magnificently situated that it makes you overlook weaknesses you'd trip over anywhere else, and there's no museum in the world that can make a visitor feel more at home. But there's also an edge. Because of the size and drama of the setting, and the character of the sculpture on view, there's a feeling of art and nature jockeying for position, each worried the other will get the upper hand. It requires a certain robustness for a sculpture to make itself felt at Storm King, and not every work on display there has what it takes.

On the face of it, the English-born sculptor William Tucker might seem an unlikely—even risky—choice for Storm King's annual special exhibition.[1] For one thing, Tucker's work has of late consisted of the modeled monolith, a form that was favored by such early modern sculptors as Rodin, Degas, and Matisse and thus one that might seem out of place amid the hard-headed modernism of Storm King's permanent collection. Then its scale, which is consciously human, makes it vulnerable to being swamped by the Art Center's physical setting and the size of much of its collection. But most of all, it is the tone of Tucker's work that sets it apart from the work around it. It is a deeply introverted, private sculpture that lacks the confident expansiveness of its many neighbors.

Nevertheless, Tucker's work more than holds its own at Storm King. Indeed, it confirms the impression left by successive encounters in art galleries: that Tucker is one of the most gifted sculptors working today. In its modest physical scale and introspective mood Tucker's work offers the viewer an experience at once more measured and more substantial than that provided by some of the more inflated or parochial fare at Storm King. And Tucker makes sense there for

1 "William Tucker: The American Decade, 1978-88" opened at Storm King in May; it runs through October 31. An illustrated catalogue, with an essay by Andrew Forge, is available at the Art Center.

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other reasons as well. He's an artist absorbed by—to borrow the title of his 1974 book on Rodin, Brancusi, and other early modernists—the language of sculpture, and by its history. Going through the exhibition, we feel Tucker's work now playing off of, now aligning itself with, the ideas and idioms on view at Storm King. At the same time, it addresses itself to issues of the moment. If other annual exhibitions at Storm King have joined the aesthetic flow of the place, or offered alternative channels, Tucker's work tacks back and forth across the mainstream. He reveals as much about the present and past of sculpture as he does about his own work.

The show has a welcome completeness for those who know Tucker's sculpture only from biennial gallery exhibitions and who have wanted a broader view. Thirty-five sculptures and drawings are on display, all drawn from the last decade. It was during this period—beginning, that is, in the mid-Seventies—that Tucker came to live in the United States, emigrating from his native England. (He became an American citizen in 1986.)

We emerge from the show at Storm King with an awareness of what the move did for him. It signaled the point at which he became his own man. That is, he stepped out from the brightly colored, Minimalist-derived object-sculptures he had made as a member of the "New Generation" of British sculptors who studied under Anthony Caro at the St. Martin's School of Art in London. And he abandoned the less derivative, but almost as formalist, pieces of the early Seventies.

As his emigration would suggest, Tucker's is one of those careers characterized by sharp breaks and changes in direction rather than by the steady pursuit of a single idea. His American work divides clearly into two phases. Until 1984, it consisted of open structures composed of recovered timbers or beams, or of plaster laid over a steel armature with subordinate flanges or struts extending outward at regular intervals. Since 1984, Tucker has moved in a different direction, manipulating large mounds of clay and plaster in an effort to imbue them with the feeling of the human body in motion and at rest. Although both groups of work are resolutely abstract, they seem to have little in common.

The sculptures from Tucker's first phase seem almost transparent, so greatly is mass subordinated to space. They either enclose space, evacuating the center and moving the focus to the perimeter, or open up to it, radiating parts from a central armature or core. *The Prisoner* exemplifies the former type. It is a shallow, four-sided volume with struts on its inner surfaces that looks as though it has been kicked high on one side—one vertical is dented inward, pressing its struts toward the rest like cogwheels that are about to interlock. *The Contract,* on the other hand, resembles a version of *The Prisoner* turned inside out. It's an L-shaped composite of two-by-fours braced by an inner diagonal with uniformly short struts projecting outward like so many spines. Both works reveal Tucker's interest in probing the ground of sculpture—its orientation to the environment and viewer. By enclosing the "action" of his sculptures, as he does in *The Prisoner,* Tucker sets them off from us. Unenclosed (*The Contract* is an example), the barrier falls, and they assume a place in the space we inhabit.

Tucker's pre-1984 work seems linked to the Constructivist impulse in its assembled character and in its reduction of mass to line and structure. But it actually has more to do with something iconic and monumental. Mass may be reduced to line, but it's a heavy line. Tucker adds timbers or builds up the plaster to add as much weight as possible. By affirming the pull of gravity, these sculptures tell you they're part of the same world you are. (In the catalogue essay for a show he organized in 1974, Tucker wrote, "The condition of sculpture is gravity.")

Tucker's affirmation of gravity is what really sets him off from Constructivism, which habitually denies it. Tucker's sculpture—though nominally open-form, like Smith's and Caro's—isn't about laying claim

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to space through physical spread or distension. Instead, his pieces hew to an actual or implied center. They almost seem worried about making too much of themselves. *The Contract* may be as bare and open as any Constructivist sculpture around, but with its small struts and modest elevation, its reach into space is tentative and discreet—so much so that, far from possessing space or grappling with it (as does so much of the sculpture at Storm King), the piece seems only to want to get under its skin a little.

Tucker's greatest departure from the Constructivist aesthetic lies in the realm of content. While much Constructivist sculpture is about little more than formal relations, Tucker goes beyond that, suggesting a physical or psychological state of being, though one at odds with modernism's recurrent mood of *joie de vivre*. The titles of his work—*The House of the Hanged Man, The Hostage, The Prisoner*—give off a dark cast, a feeling reinforced by certain elisions between a sculpture's form and the ideas suggested by his titles. *The House of the Hanged Man* (named after a Cézanne painting) is a large 'A'-shaped structure made of bolted, creosoted beams with half a dozen smaller wooden pieces descending from them vertically. It's a brooding work, swathed in an aura of recent (or imminent) tragedy. *The Prisoner,* with its pressed-in side and converging struts or "teeth," conveys a powerful feeling of constraint and pressure. There's no specific illustration in these sculptures, though. Tucker is treading the line between abstract sculptural object and quasi-narrative reference, asking whether abstract sculpture cannot aspire to more than formalist (Caro) or polemical (Judd) expression, and proposing his own answer that it can.

What's remarkable in this phase of Tucker's work is the scope of what is at root a very simple formal language: struts coming off a spine. That language expresses everything from *The Prisoner*'s enforced enclosure to the freedom and litheness of *The Law,* a drawing of five verticals projecting from an upward-arching plane. It's as if he's putting his formal language through its paces, test-

important works by

balthus
butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
riopelle
rouan
saura
tanguy
zao wou-ki

pierre matisse gallery
41 east 57th street
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ing its range and suppleness. These first sculptures have the quality of a dice throw, not because they appear careless but because totally new and unpredictable results are arrived at through a regular recombination of identical elements.

To step outside Storm King's main building and see Tucker's work since 1984 is to pass into a different world. The spare, skeletal, assembled forms give way to tooled monoliths. These works are apparently influenced by a new appreciation of Rodin and a desire to place the figure once again at the center of sculptural discourse. But Tucker's "figures" are unlike any we have seen before. They seem more like mounds of material awaiting the artist's touch. In *The Horses* (1987), we may discern the generalized heads of horses caught in the act of rearing, but we can't be confident that we're right. The animal image keeps slipping in and out of focus, trading places and competing with visions of inert, untransfigured matter.

As it happens, Tucker isn't interested in the figure as it is known to the eye. He's after something more immediate, even more intimate. It's what the body feels like from the inside that seems to concern him, the body as something both "occupied" and "carried around"—as the subject and object of physical exertion. Accordingly, Tucker conveys the idea of the figure by means of an opposition between built-up mass and inner animation. *The Gymnasts,* for example—a series of sculptures from 1984—is made up of two curving, L-shaped slabs which defy their own weight by "flexing." *Okeanos* (1987-88)—a magnificent circumflex-shaped, larger-than-life-sized piece—seems to be heaving itself toward the vertical before our eyes.

As with the earlier skeletal sculptures, Tucker is careful in these pieces to avoid a reference that is too specific. This is the point of generalizing his form. He wants as wide a range of reference as possible. Indeed, in these monoliths he's doing what he did earlier: giving us a sculptural form that appears so minimally worked as to be little more than raw material, yet a form possessed of the most forceful emotive power. Tucker isn't alone among sculptors these days in pursuing a broad associativeness in his work, but he goes about it differently. There's an idea among younger sculptors that the more things a work suggests the better it is, an idea that someone like Joel Fischer has made a career out of. But when a work of art means many things, it usually winds up meaning nothing, and this is the problem with Fischer's work and with that of some of his fellows.

Tucker's work, by contrast, has a center. You may be able to see a rearing horse's head in one of the sculptures, or (alternatively) an arm, part of a leg, or perhaps a torso. But what's more important is the general idea, which remains constant: the body under stress. Tucker thus manages to address the question of how to expand sculpture's range of meaning in the wake of Minimalism without falling into the trap of making "consensus sculpture"—work that has a little something for everyone but no real character of its own.

As Tucker sets out to communicate a sensation of the lived-in body, he is far from dispassionate. These sculptures are filled with pathos. Their surfaces seem scarred rather than hand-worked, and they convey the grinding effort that is exerted in levering physical bulk against itself and gravity. For Tucker, the body is a tragic thing, doomed to wage a battle it can never completely win.

Pathos, indeed, is the real subject of all Tucker's work, the one common denominator in an otherwise highly diverse oeuvre. For it is present also throughout the skeletal, pre-1984 pieces. *The Prisoner*'s pressure and containment express this pathos, but most of all it is evident in the way Tucker's work is oriented to the world. Its isolation in and minimal displacement of space, and the simple, unembellished materials he uses (wood is left unsanded, blemishes remain undisguised), endow his work with a prosaic nakedness. In one sense, of course, this is nothing more than literalism of the kind

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seen in Donald Judd's work, a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the worlds of art and everyday things. But in Tucker's hands it adds up to something larger. I find it hard to think about any one of his pieces of this period without also thinking of a seemingly unrelated one—Houdon's *La Frileuse* in the Metropolitan Museum, a bronze of a nude young woman huddling with a shawl around her shoulders and over her head shielding herself from the cold. For me, works like *The Prisoner* and *The Contract* partake of the same feeling of internalized bodily exposure as does Houdon's shivering figure.

In *Okeanos* and the other monoliths, Tucker's view of the figure is unlike any other in modern sculpture. You have to go back to Degas to encounter sculpture as expressive of the inner stresses and strains of the human body in motion. Indeed, Tucker has taken Degas's sculpture to its logical conclusion, stripping it of all that "clothed" his idea—the naturalistic figure, the dance subject—to arrive at an essence. Other sculptors have attempted something similar, Caro in his early bronze work and Joel Shapiro in his Minimalist-derived, figural abstractions. But by retaining the integral human form, they were only able to go so far. The force of Tucker's sculptures comes from his jettisoning the human form. No "subject" interferes with pure sensation.

The affinity of Tucker's work with Degas's points up an important aspect of Tucker's latest phase, one felt especially in the environment of Storm King: its dialogue with sculpture's past. For many contemporary sculptors, time begins no earlier than Picasso. It is as though there's a point beyond which one cannot go as a sculptor and still hope to fit into the mainstream; and Picasso, or perhaps Brancusi, represents that terminal point. Storm King's collection traces its roots back to Picasso and González, while much of what's visible in the galleries now has antecedents only in Minimalism. One can't help feeling that this circumscribed historical outlook has led to a comparable aesthetic constriction.

In reaching past Brancusi and Picasso and returning to the modeled monolith, Tucker has re-admitted to artistic discourse the relevance of a tradition before modernism. Indeed, he asks us to think about sculpture as an expressive language not limited to any one period style but unbound by historical divisions. In so doing, he makes available a body of material—largely closed off until now—with which to renew sculpture. Michelangelo and the *Belvedere Torso* are as present in Tucker's sculpture as Degas and Rodin. But they are invoked to address issues about sculpture's meaning and its direction at the present moment rather than out of some misplaced feeling of nostalgia. It is one of the paradoxes and triumphs of Tucker's art that by reaching into the past it should have so much to say to us in the present.

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All around the town

by Jed Perl

Spaces. At the intersection of Broadway and Prince Streets rundown office space is turning into slick gallery space at a fast clip. Those of us who spent last season listening to power saws and getting lost in half-wired hallways at 560 Broadway, where the postmodern appointments are only now falling into place, will probably spend the coming season rubbing elbows with the same construction workers up the street or around the corner. Boomtime on the east edge of SoHo is partly a result of the migration of galleries that opened in the East Village in the early Eighties but could never draw in the crowds; and the concentration of galleries in highrises does make it easier for all of us to get to a range of shows. But the use of office space as gallery space—long a fact of life on Fifty-seventh Street—also lends a dangerously homogenized tone in a city where as it is every streetscape is coming to resemble every other one. Though there is much that can be done to give a gallery in an office space a distinctive look (the Diane Brown Gallery at 560 Broadway has attempted to retain the storefront style of its earlier SoHo quarters), nothing can be done about the approach, which will inevitably be down a generic office building hallway. SoHo's rickety staircases, tin ceilings, and broad dimensions are the new victims of "economic prosperity," which has already turned the domestic-scale galleries of the Upper East Side, with their elegant fireplaces and drawing-room ambience, into wisps of memory. Uptown and downtown, what's involved isn't merely a loss of charm. Space, texture, color, and light are the lifeblood of art, and as those precious elements are sucked out of the gallery scene, we all lose. I find that shows in office-building spaces rarely hold in the imagination the way shows in more idiosyncratic spaces do. Generic spaces beget generic experiences.

When David Beitzel moved his gallery into the street-level location at 113 Greene Street that had been the downtown outpost of the Washburn Gallery for several years, he inherited a situation that was anything but generic. The space has weird proportions: overly high and deep in relation to its skimpy width, and narrower at the front than at the back. It's a space in which normal-sized paintings have never really looked at home (the proportions make your eyes move up, over, away), but of course the weirdness of the shape is what makes you remember the space and want it to work for art. Washburn's most successful installation was probably Ilya Bolotowsky's reconstructions of his WPA murals—two large horizontal compositions that were originally conceived as accompaniments to architecture and nearly filled those long walls. Another Washburn artist, the sculptor Ronald Bladen, put a skinny relief made of wood and sheets of aluminum along one wall; but Bladen's work, which was terribly self-conscious in its use of industrial materials, fit all too neatly in. It was a solution to a prob-

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lem all right, but there was no enchantment, no surprise.

There hasn't been much surprise in Beitzel's installations, either, until the arrival of Chris Macdonald, who makes trains, cars, and trucks out of scrap wood and nuts and bolts and responds to that impossibly shaped interior like a pool shark going for the shot that will win him the game. Macdonald answers the off-balance proportions of the room with the off-balance proportions and jumps-in-scale of his own work. He contrasts a choo-choo train that's fifty feet long and not two feet high with a sort of truck whose wheels are maybe twelve times as large as those of the train. *Zug,* the long, low train, comes practically to the front door of the gallery; you almost trip over it as you walk in. By juxtaposing sculptures that vary radically in size and scale, Macdonald takes the oddity of the Beitzel space to its logical conclusion; he makes it feel odder, more disquieting. Much of the work is crammed together in the middle of the room, and this forces us toward the walls, so that our standard viewing point (in the middle looking out) is reversed. We're on the outside, looking in.

Macdonald's sculpture is Constructivist ballyhoo. He mixes ideas borrowed from the models in children's woodworking books with a taste for cubist form that recalls the projects of the early Russian modernists. There's no particular refinement to his big, disk-like wheels and clunky cabins. I suspect that if one or another of these constructions was exhibited in isolation, it would look fairly inert and overly clever. But his show—which ranged from the tiny trucks on the window ledge at the front of the gallery to the vehicle with a crank that climbed toward the ceiling—makes a beguiling assemblage. (If only Macdonald knew how to incorporate those shifts of scale into the individual works . . .) When he puts it all together in a room, Macdonald proves that he knows something about form-in-space. He reveals an artist's eye. In a sense, he tells us what we already knew: that this space has possibilities. He actualizes them, as a sharp-eyed decorator would. (Decorator isn't an insult. What are Michelangelo's Laurentian Library and Bernini's Scala Regia but divine decoration?) Macdonald points up the possibilities with a clunky grace—a downtowner's grace. He takes nuts, bolts, hunks of wood—and—voila!

Dreams. The Starn Twins' contribution to the end-of-season show at the Stux Gallery in June, *Double Mona Lisa,* is poetic in ways the Twins' work hasn't been before. At roughly nine by thirteen feet, it's one of their bigger pieces, and the size may be good for them. This is the first time they've actually achieved a little of the lyrical mystery their fans have been reading into their photography from the start. The basic image here is a shot of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in her glass box in the Italian Gallery at the Louvre. We see the painting itself, and around it and over it, reflected in the glass, the museum-goers who are looking at it, and the other paintings that are hung around the room. Pieced together out of sepia-toned photographic enlargements, and doubled so that there are two *Mona Lisa*s adjacent to one another, the composition is a romanticized souvenir of a modern-day Grand Tour. Much of the magic comes from the *Mona Lisa* herself. Her smile is the real thing, but of course she's also a pop icon who's been replicated ad infinitum. She's the perfect subject for the Twins' tech-y nostalgia. And yet they really seem to be responding to her dreamy allure. The Starn Twins' romanticism is heating up here, gaining some weight and dimension. For once they aren't dealing with blank classical images but with the seduction of a great image. They may believe that they're basically seeing the *Mona Lisa* in Duchamp's Dadaist terms; but their faded photographs can't help evoking the glories of the Louvre—the *Mona Lisa,* and all the other Leonardos, and the Raphaels, and Titian's *Concert Champêtre.*

Daughters. No contemporary painter knows more about the messy bountifulness of family life than the immensely gifted Temma

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Bell. In the series of still lifes, interiors, portraits, and landscapes that she showed at the Bowery Gallery last April, genres intermingle and blend. A table crammed with vegetables leads our eye to a landscape out the window; a self-portrait becomes a double portrait when a child turns up in a corner. All the paintings revolve around the life Bell has been living with her husband and three daughters on a farm in upstate New York; and the range of images that the show includes—landscapes in autumn, spring, and winter; girls at sleep and at play; the artist as mother, with an infant or growing girl—suggests a long novel's entangled plots. There are always a lot of things to look at in Bell's paintings: fruits and vegetables, vases with flowers, jars and bottles, pictures, mirrors, farm animals, towheaded children. Each element is a part of the domestic story; but each element also suggests a painting problem, and though it would be too much to say that Bell resolves every challenge she sets for herself, she responds to each of them with an intelligence and a generosity that lift the everyday up pretty high. Bell paints it all, and her brushstrokes thrive on subject matter in much the way a novelist's sentences do. Her technique is derived from nineteenth- and twentieth-century French painting; at one point or another the scribbled surfaces, the underlining of a form with a black line, the bright light colors and the soupy darker ones recall moments from Corot, Derain, Bonnard, and a host of others. Bell isn't dampeningly reverent about those masters of the past; it's their gift for embracing life that comes through in the contemporary mood of her work.

Temma Bell makes us feel that painting culture is part of the natural order of things. Both her parents—Louisa Matthiasdottir and Leland Bell—are painters; for the daughter, tradition is virtually a family affair. Is it any wonder that Temma Bell, who's forty-three, is now painting her daughters and her husband? Family ties have always been at the center of her art. (Back in 1973 the Canton Art Institute in Canton, Ohio, mounted a show called "A Family of Painters," which included Leland Bell, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Temma Bell.) Among the priceless gifts the younger Bell has received from her parents are a knack for uncovering pictorial structures in the natural world and an unfailing sense of how a composition fits into a rectangle. Weaving her way between Matthiasdottir's brilliantly colored landscapes, portraits, and still lifes and Leland Bell's darker ones, Temma Bell has never been a slavish imitator; but in the past her work was often too much *in the manner of.* For years it seemed that the better a Temma Bell was, the more it resembled a Matthiasdottir or a Leland Bell. This is an untenable position for an artist. Only now is Temma Bell coming into her own; and not the least of her accomplishments is to show us some of the ways in which her parents' considerable and still growing achievements add up to a legacy that a younger artist can *use.*

For Leland Bell and Louisa Matthiasdottir, who came of age in the Forties, at a time when the strict beauty of classic European abstraction was still something new, the onslaught of nature has always been subdued by a certain asceticism, a certain severity. (The fact that Matthiasdottir has never painted abstractly doesn't lessen the impact that abstraction has had on her work.) In the art of Bell and Matthiasdottir it often seems as if abstraction signifies restraint, nature signifies release, and abstraction and nature play an unending cat-and-mouse game. Temma Bell feels no particular attachment to classical abstraction, and so the restraint side of her parents' equation doesn't really hold. Her work has a dense literalness that brings it closer than either of her parents' painting has ever been to the overload of images we know from, say, Bonnard. She's also closer to the spirit of André Derain than her father, who has been, in lectures and articles, such an eloquent spokesman for the great ex-Fauve. A number of her self-portraits and still lifes are practically glosses on Derains; her naturalism has a vulgar streak (I mean this in a positive sense) that recaptures some of Derain's verismo excite-

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ment. Temma Bell's cornucopia of imagery casts her parents' spartan elegance in a new and clarifying light.

But if formally Temma Bell's work is as much an extension of Leland Bell's as of Louisa Matthiasdottir's, the particular sensibility that she brings to the traditions of Bonnard and Derain is much closer to her mother's than to her father's. In the French tradition women have generally been viewed as the other—as wives, or servants, or the flowers of high society, or erotic playthings in the boudoir. Part of the excitement of Louisa Matthiasdottir's rather imperious self-portraits has always had to do with our sense that a woman has never looked out of a painting with such self-confidence before. When Matthiasdottir, in a 1982 pastel, wore a cap with a brim like the brim in Chardin's famous pastel self-portrait, she seemed to be saying, "Move over, men, the women are moving in!" (And Matthiasdottir is a good enough pastel artist to take on Chardin without looking like a fool.) To the old artists, who let their wives or servants cook the dinner they painted, Matthiasdottir says, "I'll cook it, but I'll paint it, too." In Temma Bell's work the takeover continues.

Bell makes the link to her mother's work very clear in several small paintings of her sleeping daughters; they are virtual recapitulations of the paintings Matthiasdottir did of the young Temma a quarter century ago. And in Bell's recent self-portraits, the mature artist looks out at us with the straight-backed pride we know from her mother's work. There was a self-portrait on the announcement for Bell's recent show. It was called *The Farmer's Wife*; but this refined lady hardly looked like a farmer's wife, and once you'd explored the show, where that whole farmer's-wife life was taken in by a razor-sharp pictorial intelligence, that title couldn't but seem a bit ironic. Has any farmer's wife ever painted like this? And how many farmers have?

I don't want to exaggerate the extent to which Bell's work is fulfilled. While the first time I saw her show I was elated, the second time around I noticed all the things that

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hadn't come off, and felt grumpy. It's probably inevitable that an artist who's busting out in several directions at once will have trouble with follow-through. There are places in the work where Bell seems on the verge of solving a problem—of finding a way to turn a corner or open up the distance—but can't quite realize her idea. Still, there's always an idea. And even when Bell's paintings don't add up, I find that I can respond to the boldness of her attack. She's gutsy but lucid; this is a rare combination.

In the show, one didn't know quite where to look first: at one of the (too) many rural landscapes, with their fields and lines of trees and horses standing in profile, like tiny Etruscan bronzes; or at a still life with pumpkins and squash; or at a study of napping kids. To that awful old cliché that women don't have to do creative work because they create children, Temma Bell—following in her mother's footsteps—has the most marvelous response. She's telling us that she can make terrific kids (hers are blonde-haired beauties), but that she can make terrific paintings, too.

Shapes. Careening teacups, lopsided exclamation points, and formica-covered kitchen tables are among the elements that Elizabeth Murray stirs into the semi-abstract canvases that dominated her mid-career retrospective at the Whitney in May and June. Murray's admirers read these paintings as unruly little domestic dramas that boil over into a big sensational love-hate relation with the history of modern art. But what the love part is and what the hate part is aren't always very easy to figure out.

In a catalogue essay, the critic Roberta Smith relates Murray's canvases and career to the rising fortunes of women in the art scene of the Eighties. (Murray is forty-eight.) Smith says that "Murray's art has evolved a distinctly feminist character," and that "Murray is part of what might be called the degenderization of art." According to Smith, Murray is a formalist who uses classic modern techniques to bring into contemporary art "a kind of craziness which has conventionally been thought of as 'female.'" Smith is writing about levels of experience—aesthetic and otherwise—that are damn hard to deal with. I don't think her reasoning is uninteresting; and I don't think the unspoken component of her argument—that modernism is in some sense "male"—is absurd. I'm sympathetic to Smith's analysis as theory. But when she goes on to assert that "Murray has developed an uncanny ability to convert emotional pressures into formal ones," I can't follow, for the simple reason that the work leaves me cold. I can accept the idea that Murray's work is a dissent from tradition and that this dissent is feminist; but how interesting will the dissent be if one hasn't been inspired by the painting as painting? (And if anyone wants to rule me a biased observer because I'm male, I know plenty of women who don't like the work, either.)

The first commandment of painting is that the support should be a stable, symmetrical shape. The point of commandment one is to create a foil for the tensions within the painting. Like all rules in art, this one can be broken if there's something to be gained; but when a canvas has as many sides and curves and angles as one of Murray's, we're no longer seeing exceptions to rules—we're seeing exceptions to exceptions. Murray overlaps her strangely shaped supports into multi-canvas configurations and sometimes allows them to twist up into Rococo-ish curls at the corners. There's a lot going on here. Forms jump around and nuzzle and interpenetrate. Big things gobble up little things. Representation segues into abstraction. Murray's paintings do have subject matter; but it's subject matter in the rough. What's missing is the poetic glue that would unite all the odds and ends into an imaginative whole.

Because Murray is playing around with a wide variety of elements, the paintings catch many viewers up into a gosh-what's-that game. I think people are impressed by a composition that at first appears to be abstract and then, as they look at it, turns out to contain ordinary objects. Murray's

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work jibes neatly with the middlebrow view that abstraction is a puzzle and that the puzzle will turn out to have a simple (and representational) solution if only you can find the key.

The paintings are programmatically anti-programmatic; and so motifs don't develop or evolve. An evolution has to have a starting point; Murray's early work of the Seventies, in a ditsy mood that relates to the Chicago Funk style of Roger Brown and others, suggests that there was no starting point to speak of. (It's easy to turn the grand manner into a big joke when you began without any feeling for the grand manner.) Nowadays, Murray's color consists of harsh complimentaries colliding into edges and planes of bluish or brownish muck. The overlaps and modeled forms are straight out of the academic abstract surrealism of the Forties. Whether Murray means a joke on Forties abstraction or an homage is unclear. When you paint this dully, with ugly ridges and globs of coagulated paint, the joke is always going to end up being on you, the artist. But then of course Murray is at the Whitney, so maybe the joke is on us.

Boys. In David La Chapelle's oversized Cibachrome photographs, which were at the 56 Bleecker Gallery in May, the old Catholic-kitsch-as-sexual-turn-on routine is run through once more, *and with feeling.* The adolescent boys with the brown Michelangelesque curls, who play at being saints and angels, are perfect physical specimens, and the fakey-theatrical backdrops of technicolor clouds glorify them even as they send them up. In *Nativity,* a triptych, the side panels are occupied by shots of the same boy, doing a slow disco dance in a pair of white feathered wings. In the central panel he presides over the Christ Child and a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired Madonna who's as perfect in her female line as he is in his male one. The sight of this pair, with their god-given attractions, playing at Western civilization's great roles, has overtones of Cocteau, Buñuel, and the contemporary Spanish movie director Pedro Almodóvar (among his films are *Matador,* 1986, and *Law of Desire,* 1987). The actors bring a certain seriousness to their roles; as in some of Cocteau's work, there's seriousness in the silliness of the conceits. La Chapelle's whole show is composed of visual clichés; but for La Chapelle, who's twenty-six, these are obviously beloved clichés, and he communicates the love, and sometimes, as in *Birth of Adam,* where the first man stifles a punkish yawn, he's ahead of the clichés.

The style of La Chapelle's work is a sort of cross between Cindy Sherman and Gilbert and George. I find the medium of the large-scaled color photograph as slickly uninviting in La Chapelle as in those other artists. Nevertheless, a straightforward prankishness breaks through here. La Chapelle isn't deconstructing photography or critiquing kitsch; he leaves all that to an avant-garde obscurantist like Cindy Sherman. Nor is he coy about his relation to pictorial theatricality. He knows that surface effects are surface effects, to be enjoyed. And he knows how to bring out the beauty in the planes of a face the way a good cinematographer does. He has a feeling for pictorial values. Using young flesh and new technology, he sends an alluring fin-de-siècle perfume through the gallery air. We're approaching the end of another century. La Chapelle wants us to make ourselves comfortable in his postmodern bordello.

Logos. The three-artist team called General Idea created a stir at the Koury Wingate Gallery in May with a show devoted to the AIDS epidemic. General Idea has turned Robert Indiana's famous LOVE logo of the Sixties into an AIDS logo for the Eighties, and though this wasn't the first time General Idea's insignia had been shown in New York, it was the first time there had been a gallery full of AIDS logos. At Koury Wingate five large AIDS canvases hung on one wall, ten smaller ones on the opposite wall. With the letters and intervals between the letters painted in a series of flat, posterish hues, the overall impression was one of cheerful emptiness. The transformation of

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LOVE into AIDS was a simple equation—an equation so blunt it mocked all the this-is-what-the-sexual-revolution-has-come-to commentaries. Art is by no means equal to the overwhelming impact of immediate experience; and if there wasn't artistry in General Idea's show, there was artfulness—the artfulness that comes from leaving the unsayable unsaid. Responding to tragedy with a barrage of bright colors, General Idea was refusing to drape an entire generation in funerary black.

Symbols. The paintings of Forrest Bess, which were at Hirschl & Adler Modern in April and May, are pretty crummy, and the fact that the artist was an eccentric who died in 1977 in Bay City, Texas, the same small Gulf Coast town where he'd been born sixty-six years before, ought not to be allowed to confuse the issue. (The show will be at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago from September 10 through October 16.) The paintings are small-scale icons. They're supposed to catch us up in mini-mysteries: the mystery of a simple pattern that fills a space from end to end; or of a couple of enigmatic shapes that float in front of a monochromatic space. But Bess doesn't have the painter's energy that will ignite a surface. He can't surprise his symbols into works of art. He lays on the paint in thick, dull, even strokes; and the couple of colors that he uses in a particular painting (red and blue, black and golden yellow) don't bounce off of one another in an engaging way.

John Yau, a poet and critic who in the past has written eloquently on the late de Chirico and the English painter Leon Kossoff, has contributed an intelligently modulated catalogue essay on Bess's art and life. Yau makes the best possible case for this strange man who eked out a living as a fisherman on the southernmost edge of the United States, and had peculiar visions, and managed to show his paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City. I understand the attraction of a figure such as Bess; he seems to come out of a purer, tougher time in the history of American art. Bess's supporters aren't blind; they know the shortcomings of his work; they're not claiming he's a genius. And yet I can't help but be a little appalled at some of the praise that's been heaped on this show. Intellectuals can't seem to resist being condescendingly appreciative of naïfs. And when the naïf writes mystical letters to Meyer Schapiro, the intellectuals are smitten. That the surfaces of the paintings are inert doesn't seem to matter. (Schapiro, in a 1962 appreciation of Bess, said that "skill, power of rendering, the delights of spontaneity of the hand, do not tempt him." Amen.) A lot of people who had nice things to say about Bess's work this past spring wouldn't have given the paintings the time of day if they'd been done by a twenty-two-year-old fresh out of art school.

Doodles. William Wegman, who's best-known for photographic portraits of his dog decked out in a variety of odd outfits, also does paintings, in a quirky mix of oil and acrylic. The canvases that Wegman showed at Holly Solomon in May have dark, mottled surfaces, upon which Wegman inscribes odd little scenes of, for example, jungle animals, or a Middle American farm, or a romantic Greek isle. The work has a perky charm; it's the kind of amateurish stuff you'd see on the walls of a pizzeria. The best painting in the show was *Irrigation,* a fantasy of sprinklers and water towers that's like a Sunday painter's reprise of selected motifs from Raoul Dufy's great *La Fée Electricité.* The easy, almost sloppy rhythm of the show, which was full of figures that might have escaped from Forties cartoons and advertisements, amused gallery-goers who were weary of the formalities of the midtown art scene. Critics, in a rare show of near-unanimity, were happy. The show had its teasing playfulness, but not much else. People were there because Wegman is a star. They stayed to have some fun with a star who's not afraid to let his hair down. I wonder if he can do more. The best thing on display was a tiny drawing in colored ink. Called *Life Aboard a Ship,* it consists of a few

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Marsden Hartley, oil, 1972, 30 X 25"

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whimsical lines outlining a boat, with, overlapping it, a champagne bottle, some bars of music—emblems of the pleasures of a cruise.

More spaces. West Twenty-second Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, where the DIA Foundation opened its latest exhibition space last season, is a picture-perfect holdover from the industrial New York of the early twentieth century. The cobblestone street is still lined with small factories and repair plants, and in June, when the first round of DIA shows (of work by Joseph Beuys and two of his students, Ima Knoebel and Blinky Palermo) was going down, activity across the street at the Alcamo Marble Works spilled out onto the curb beneath a blue sky that was as lovely and opaque as a theatrical backdrop. The DIA Foundation, which has been collecting and supporting a great deal of environmental and site-specific art since the Seventies, wanted a space that would give large-scale works room to breathe, and they've got it. The three floors of exhibition space at 548 West Twenty-second Street have the austere opulence that only the very rich can achieve. (De Menil money is behind DIA.) Some of the doors and window frames in the former factory have been taken down to the original metal, and they have a wonderful distressed look, like a post-industrial version of eighteenth-century patina-ed wood. Through the freshly washed windows of the upper floors one looks at a view in which nineteenth-century brick buildings intermingle with Deco façades. This is the New York look we all dream of living in; it's as if Donald Trump's city had never happened.

At DIA the setting almost makes love to the art. The stacks and heaps of industrial materials that Beuys and Knoebel employ fit into the space gently, beguilingly. There's a pleasing frank dignity to Beuys's piles of felt and copper, and to Knoebel's piles of lumber and prefab doors. These assemblages are exactly as beautiful as the metal window frames and concrete floors of the galleries, the cobblestone street outside, and the rusty

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radiator I saw halfway up the block. This art, which aestheticizes industrial materials, has no umph to it. It blends right in with the beautiful industrial setting. Where the work approaches more conventional modes, its impact is shadowy. A roomful of Beuys's drawings consists of vague, slightly dotty doodlings—words, crazy maps, faint profiles. The sketches—which may have been inspired by early Klee and may remind some viewers of the drawings of John Graham—are pleasant but forgettable. *To the People of New York City,* Blinky Palermo's last effort (he died in 1977 at the age of thirty-three), consists of a series of forty rather staid geometric abstractions. The aluminum panels on which Palermo painted are divided into rectangular areas of red, yellow, and black, but the yellow has so much orange in it that there's no tension, no dialectic.

At DIA the setting carries all before it; it's certainly a setting to see. Around the corner, on Twenty-third Street, is the Gagosian Gallery, a space with the impressive dimensions of Mary Boone's West Broadway digs (at, no doubt, considerably less rent). Gagosian has gained a following with a series of shows of post-World War II "classics": Andy Warhol's paintings based on FBI wanted posters were featured in May. Lunch can be had at the corner of Tenth Avenue and Twenty-second Street at the nifty Empire Diner, a piece of gentrified Americana where those who've beat the nine-to-five rap pass the time.

Suburbs. I went by Eric Fischl's show at the Mary Boone Gallery to see if there was life after the mid-career retrospective (Fischl had his at the Whitney in 1986). Fischl is still pulling in the crowds, and his painting has continued its evolution from the enigmatic but charged narrative episodes of the early Eighties toward increasingly diffuse exercises in mood painting. At the same time the color has gone from the fairly even gray-greens of a couple of years ago to an ever sharper chiaroscuro. Here some commentators may see an increase in painting craft, and if painting craft rests in flinging brushstrokes around in a prettily insouciant way, maybe Fischl has made some advance. But he's light years away from John Singer Sargent's talents in this line, and Sargent can be a model only for mini-minds. Fischl was always a lousy artist. Now he's a smugly lousy artist. No one ever called him an innovative painter, and there's nothing innovative about his recent habit of doing some of the paintings on several canvases. One canvas hangs on the wall, and the image extends onto a couple of smaller canvases that rest on the floor. The multi-canvas arrangements are a diversionary tactic and an irrelevancy.

Fischl's attitude toward his Middle American subject matter is distanced and vaguely disapproving. (Do the people in Fischl's paintings ever have fun?) Philip Roth, the latest writer to do one of Mary Boone's celebrity catalogue essays, has something to say about the bathroom being the last closed room in American life; but Eric Fischl isn't really the artist for people who want that door opened (whoever they might be). In spite of the sex-shock angle in some of Fischl's earlier paintings, his subjects are basically familiar ones—the self-indulgence of the affluently middle-aged, and the embarrassing amusements of the very young. Fischl's churning, twilight mood is familiar, too. His recent work looks an awful lot like the American realism of the Forties and Fifties—the sort of thing Harvey Dinnerstein and Joseph Hirsch did, the sort of thing that's still shown at the Midtown and Grand Central Galleries, the sort of thing that was featured in the show "Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting, 1940-1960" which Greta Berman and Jeffrey Wechsler organized at Rutgers in 1982. Looking through the catalogue of that show, I found some pretty close parallels to Fischl. Dinnerstein's *Brownstone* (1958-60) has Fischl's dark, dissociated mood. Meanwhile, Fischl's recent paintings of naked women silhouetted against a backdrop of beach, water, and sky look a lot like some of Walter Stuempfig's work (note *Lifeguards,* 1954, and *Two Houses,* 1946). I

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don't know if these connections are something Fischl is aware of; it's a possibility. Joseph Hirsch was included in the "Fictions" show at Curt Marcus last season, and I wouldn't be surprised if that "other side of American painting" were being studied pretty closely in some SoHo studios these days.

Let's keep one thing straight. Fischl does the sort of painting that sophisticated New Yorkers would have laughed at a decade ago. And they were right then. Shadowy parties, mysterious encounters at the end of long summer afternoons—these melodramatic subjects aren't new. Nor is the way that Fischl seeks to express emotional instability through formal instability. There's murderous cleverness in the artist who uses a compositional rupture to express an emotional rupture. Cleverness is all. For years some of us have been arguing that most of the highly touted American art of the Sixties and Seventies consists of little more than academicism masquerading as avant-gardism. In a sense what's now happened is that the subtle form of academicism that is Morris Louis or Frank Stella has devolved into a blatant form of academicism—Eric Fischl.

Everybody knows that the media and the marketplace are responsible for the yawning gap that now separates the actual achievement of an artist like Eric Fischl from his spectacular reputation. But few are really willing to admit to what extent the sort of fame Fischl has achieved influences people. In the past couple of years we've heard critics explaining to one another and to everyone else that we must be careful to be fair to the famous—not to hate them for their fame. No need to worry. The fact of the matter is that fame is really all that matters to ninety-five percent of the educated public, and that even those who ought to know better take the famous far more seriously than the unfamous. *Scarsdale,* Fischl's painting of a middle-aged woman slumped in a chair in an evening gown that looks a lot like a wedding dress, arrives on the gallery wall with, as the saying goes, every advantage: the average gallery-goer will take it as great painterly painting, and those who know better will look for irony, for a complex metaphor. As for this reviewer, I expect that most people are going to finish my gallery round-up with the clear recollection of a thumbs down on Eric Fischl and not the slightest memory of the thumbs up on a painter named Temma Bell.

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Dance

Slaughter on Columbus Avenue: the American Music Festival

by Eva Resnikova

The American Music Festival sounded like a bad idea from the very beginning, when New York City Ballet co-ballet master in chief Peter Martins announced his plans at a press conference in May of last year. Not only did American music seem a slippery peg on which to hang a dance festival—past City Ballet festivals had been dedicated to individual composers whose music Balanchine considered intrinsically danceable—but Martins had invited a number of modern and postmodern choreographers to create works on the City Ballet dancers. Attempting to play down the significance of what was in fact a huge departure for the company, he vaguely described these choreographers as being "not automatically associated with classical ballet," then added, "They speak a slightly different language, or perhaps dialect, from us." But the difference between Balanchine's language and those of the likes of Lar Lubovitch, Eliot Feld, William Forsythe, and Laura Dean is at the heart of what New York City Ballet has stood for from its inception, and to hear the company's artistic director pretend otherwise was chilling.

The results—seen during the first three weeks of the company's spring season in April and May—confirmed one's direst expectations. Slogging through the twenty-two premieres by fourteen choreographers, one struggled to discern a focus. There were composers who work in traditions with far stronger ties to Europe than to the country of their birth, like Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, who advertised her artistic patrimony by using the generic title *Tanzspiel* to describe her commissioned score. Other composers provided music that was simply unsuited to dancing, and certainly to the meager talents of the choreographers who chose it. Indeed, at times there seemed an inverse relationship between a choreographer's musical sophistication and the difficulty of the score he selected. Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux shipwrecked himself upon the rocky shoals of Charles Wuorinen's Concerto for Amplified Cello, and even managed to make the City Ballet dancers look uncharacteristically lost at sea. Christopher d'Amboise, a musical analphabet, had the hubris to take on Aaron Copland's Second Symphony, music of such rhythmic complexity that Koussevitzky pronounced it impossible to conduct.

Some of the music was simply unworthy. Paul Schwartz's electronic-acoustic sound score inspired what is surely the most egregious work ever inflicted upon New York City Ballet, *Archetypes,* by former principal dancer Robert Weiss. (Schwartz also served as Martins's unofficial musical adviser for the festival.) Leslie Stuck was actually William Forsythe's second choice to accompany *Behind the China Dogs,* the latest of this trendy choreographer's entries in the annals of nihilism and anomie. He had wanted to use music by the popular rock star Prince, but this was vetoed by Martins in an apparent fit of misplaced musical snobbery. At

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least Prince is recognizably part of an American vernacular tradition, whereas Stuck's disco-flavored musique concrète is indistinguishable from that of authentic Eurotrash composers like Tom Willems, Forsythe's usual collaborator.

Martins would have done well to have taken a lesson from Balanchine when it came to American music. *Who Cares?, Stars and Stripes, Western Symphony, Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, Ivesiana* are recognizably American because they all have ties to one of the multiplicity of our popular musical traditions, be it jazz, brass bands, cowboy songs, the Broadway musical, or ragtime. The new ballets that best fulfilled the apparent premise of the festival followed Balanchine's lead. Several of them were choreographed by Martins himself: *Sophisticated Lady,* to Ellington; *Tea-Rose,* to Gershwin; *A Fool for You,* to Ray Charles et al.

The best, and most American, new ballet to emerge from the festival was Paul Taylor's *Danbury Mix,* to music of Ives. Unfortunately, it had nothing to do with New York City Ballet, having been created on and danced by Taylor's own company, with a gratuitous appearance by one City Ballet dancer as a sop to the host institution. Taylor was not the only guest choreographer who found the City Ballet dancers' finely honed classical technique a limitation rather than a boon. Though Lar Lubovitch did not actually create his soft-shoe *Rhapsody in Blue* on his own company, he lost no time in effecting the transfer. (A press release for this summer's American Dance Festival, the premier showcase for international modern dance, bluntly announced that "Lubovitch's company will reclaim *Rhapsody in Blue* for modern dancers.") In effect, New York City Ballet underwrote the creation of works whose primary purpose was to enrich the repertories of modern-dance companies.

As in past festivals, several current and former City Ballet dancers were given the opportunity to try their hand at choreography. When egos and budgets were not allowed to run riot, as they were in Weiss's *Archetypes* and Bart Cook's embarrassingly amateurish *Into the Hopper,* the results were often promising. Robert LaFosse's *Woodland Sketches,* to gentle music of Edward MacDowell, was a pleasant and unpretentious series of pas de deux that revealed a talent for incorporating hints of narrative and for exploiting the personalities of his fellow dancers. Violette Verdy managed to discover an American composer, Mary Jeanne Van Appledorn, whose music sounds as if it could have been written by one of Les Six. *Set of Seven,* a piano ballet for six couples, was, like the former ballerina herself, elegant and stylish (it also boasted unusually handsome tutus by Alain Vaes), but would have benefited from more rehearsal and coaching. Corps member Miriam Mahdaviani's *The Newcomers,* to lyrical string music by David Diamond, was noteworthy for the ease and naturalness of its movement, though her theme of hierarchy among ballet dancers was overly schematically presented. Ib Andersen's *Baroque Variations,* to a postmodern score by Lukas Foss that incorporated snippets of Handel and Scarlatti, gave evidence of a keen choreographic intelligence, but it too had an intellectual framework that was overly obvious, pitting a modern couple in unitards against a trio in eighteenth-century dress (also exceptionally attractive tutus, this time by Barbara Matera).

In addition to running the festival, Martins was responsible for nine new ballets, more than any other choreographer, and with predictably variable results. If he scored successes with three of his pièces d'occasion, his more ambitious works were all seriously flawed. Zwilich's *Tanzspiel* is a distinguished score, but one wonders what attracted Martins to her brand of Teutonic expressionism, to which he seems by temperament wholly unsuited. The result was an angst-ridden melodrama of sex and death for a central couple, incongruously surrounded by a coolly abstract corps. Martins's pedantic *Barber Violin Concerto* mixed 'n' matched a ballet couple, Merrill Ashley and Adam Lüders, with a modern-dance couple, guest

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artists Kate Johnson and David Parsons, as propaganda for his "slightly different language" campaign. (Of all the possible male dancers Martins could have chosen to represent classical ballet, Lüders seems the most ludicrous.) When Martins had a barefooted Parsons and a toe-shoed Ashley invoke the ghosts of Nijinsky's Faun and Petrushka—knock-knees, dangling forearms—he no doubt intended to make the point that the roots of modern dance lay in modern ballet; but he succeeded only in making both these gifted dancers look uncomfortable and rather silly. The final movement, a tarantella with the tiny Johnson harrying the gangling Lüders, was a good joke, nothing more.

The title *The Waltz Project* is misleading, for many of the musical entries in this twentieth-century miscellany have no recognizable time, three-quarter or otherwise. But neither were Martins's pas de deux for four blandly anonymous couples recognizable as waltzes. Waltzing implies romance and passion; Martins studiously avoided either. When he did have the dancers engage in a few moments of straightforward waltzing toward the end of the ballet, it came off as a joke. The final dance, to a John Cage composition of city sounds with piano obbligato, suddenly introduced a bas-relief of a graffiti-defaced building (well executed by Vaes). As a parting shot, some whimsical Warhol dollar signs were projected onto the gray granite surface, as the dancers froze in awkward positions. (I.e., the real romance today is between a man and his lucre?) *The Waltz Project* was a hit with the audience, who appeared to find Martins's deadpan manipulations and contortions hilarious.

The young contemporary composer Michael Torke's *Black and White* seems to me weaker and more derivative than his previous collaboration with Martins, *Ecstatic Orange*. Torke's references in *Black and White* to 1940s Stravinsky and Martins's obsession with hand movements recall the middle, "Oriental" section of *Symphony in Three Movements*. But whereas Balanchine's flattened hands and bent wrists were languidly sensual, Martins's hand play—at least as performed by Heather Watts and Jock Soto—was fashion-model limp-wristed chic. *The Chairman Dances,* to outtakes from John Adams's opera *Nixon in China,* is quite simply junk. Of all the boring minimalist composers, Adams can usually be relied upon at least to provide some interesting orchestral effects; *Chairman* sounds as if it were orchestrated by Muzak, or perhaps Warner Bros. Darci Kistler and sixteen slumber-party mates are outfitted in Rouben Ter-Arutunian's tacky satin pajamas. The choreography consists mostly of small traveling steps endlessly repeated. At one point the girls kneel and wave their arms about as Kistler turns her knees in to indicate demure Oriental. Another Martins disaster was *Fred and George*. "Fred" was doomed by its casting: it's hard to think of a dancer who less epitomizes the qualities of Fred Astaire than Christopher d'Amboise, and the regal Kyra Nichols is hardly a soubrette. "George," performed to a song Balanchine wrote called "Love Is a Simple Thing," had the air of having been thrown together at the last moment, and was oddly lugubrious in effect. One might even conclude that Martins has some unresolved feelings toward his former mentor.

To call *Sophisticated Lady, Tea-Rose,* and *A Fool for You* pièces d'occasion is not to dismiss them. Fashioning ballets to fulfill specific requirements of repertory and personnel is a time-honored aspect of the profession of ballet master, and in this respect Martins has distinguished himself. *Sophisticated Lady* and *Tea-Rose* were gracious valentines to the company's two senior ballerinas, Suzanne Farrell and Patricia McBride, the former virtually retired, the latter increasingly limited in her technique. *A Fool for You* was almost consistently a delight, the exception being Martins's treatment of the title song, with its mean-spirited gestural intimations of cuckoldry. The wryly humorous "It Should've Been Me" was a tour de force that confirmed Robert LaFosse's rare talent for musical-comedy dancing, earlier revealed in Jerome Robbins's *Fancy Free*. (It would not

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be surprising if LaFosse were snatched away by Robbins for the retrospective of his musical-comedy choreography scheduled for Broadway late this year.) In "Mess Around," Martins spoofed his own former naïve foreigner's view of America by casting young dancers as a baseball player, a gangster, a guitar-strumming cowboy, and a clog-dancing country girl. Martins's self-mocking yet affectionate attitude toward the stereotypes of his adopted country struck just the right note, like Balanchine's dance-hall girls in *Western Symphony* and drum majorettes in *Stars and Stripes.*

In the context of the preponderance of dross presented during the festival, Balanchine's studies in pop Americana came as a relief and a revelation. *Stars, Western, Slaughter, Who Cares?*—send-them-home-happy ballets that in headier times some of us would skip if the casting wasn't quite right—suddenly appeared as virtual masterpieces. The festival's most positive accomplishment may have been to remind us how precious this legacy is; performances of other Balanchine ballets when the regular season resumed warned us of its fragility. As one former City Ballet dancer sadly commented on the company's recent deterioration, "We knew it would happen. We just didn't think it would happen so soon."

And meanwhile, the man responsible for maintaining the Balanchine repertory seems casually, even arrogantly, unconcerned. Martins pronounced the festival a "success" even before it opened—he could hardly have done otherwise, having spent $3 million on it—saying that the new choreographers had gotten the dancers to "move in ways I've never seen them move before." But the great problem facing New York City Ballet today is getting the dancers to move in the way that Balanchine wanted them to, so that the company he founded would remain the authoritative source for his repertory and performance style.

No one wants New York City Ballet to become a museum. Nevertheless, its first duty must be curatorial. Only when the continuity of the Balanchine repertory is assured can it consider devoting precious resources to ancillary pursuits.

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Books

Looking after virtue

by Roger Kimball

We are cautious, we modern men. Our mistrust lies in wait for the enchantments and deceptions of the conscience that are involved in every strong faith, every unconditional Yes and No.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

There are few things better calculated to garner attention than the spectacle of conversion, be it secular or religious. Thus when Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* first appeared in 1981, it was not surprising that it should have caused a mild sensation, generating notice far beyond the purlieus of academic philosophy. Not only did the book present a bold thesis, suggesting as it did that the moral chaos of modern life might be overcome by rehabilitating certain aspects of Aristotle's ethical teaching; it also appeared to represent a kind of conversion on the part of its author, the distinguished Glasgow-born philosopher and teacher. Previously best known for his combative, Marxist-inspired ruminations on liberalism, ideology, and religion, MacIntyre now said goodbye to all that—well, goodbye at least to his old militancy—and came to the "drastic" conclusion that Marxism was every bit as bankrupt as liberal individualism. One no longer found him arguing, as he did in *Marxism and Christianity* (revised edition, 1968), that Marxism is "the historical successor of Christianity" and the only philosophy "we have for re-establishing hope as a social virtue." By the time he wrote *After Virtue,* MacIntyre had decided that Marxism and liberalism both embodied "the ethos of the distinctively modern and modernizing world, and nothing less than a rejection of a large part of that ethos will provide us with a rationally and morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act."

One might object that nothing is more "modern" than the ambition to reject "a large part"—the larger the better, it sometimes seems—of the modern world. But it was obviously not *that* aspect of the modern ethos with which MacIntyre quarreled. For him, the great curse of modernity is liberal individualism; and one of the main problems with liberal individualism is that it deliberately forsakes any substantive notion of the good, thus robbing moral language—and moral life—of an intelligible foundation. Liberal moral theory tends to be cheerful, permissive, relativistic—and quite empty. By appealing to a putatively universal rationality, it seems less particularistic and less culture-bound than other views of morality; but it is also less helpful in resolving important moral dilemmas.

In other words, liberalism does not dwell on the question of man's proper ends. Instead, it offers an institutional framework within which individuals cobble together what answers they can from an unedifying process of compromise and debate. It is "the mark of a liberal order," MacIntyre remarks, "to refer its conflicts . . . to the verdicts of its legal system. The lawyers, not the philos-

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ophers, are the clergy of liberalism." Doubtless having to choose between lawyers and philosophers to preside over the commonweal is akin to choosing between Scylla and Charybdis. But MacIntyre's point is that liberalism's lack of allegiance to any positive conception of the good renders it ill equipped to provide a satisfactory response to the basic question, "What should I do?"

For MacIntyre, this is a crippling lack, one that is not shared by other traditions—what we might call "traditional traditions"—of moral inquiry. In his search for an alternative to liberalism, MacIntyre came to believe that the "key question" is whether "Aristotle's ethics, or something very like them, [can] after all be vindicated?" As he put it near the end of *After Virtue,* "the crucial moral opposition is between liberal individualism in some version or other and the Aristotelian tradition in some version or other." Two things above all attracted MacIntyre to Aristotle's ethics. In the first place, Aristotle began by proposing specific answers to the question of man's moral good. And secondly, Aristotle's conclusions about morals consciously resulted from his response to a particular tradition of moral reasoning, one inherited largely from the heroic culture of Homer and from Plato.

In both respects, Aristotle's ethics are the obverse of the ethics of liberalism. Where Aristotle advocated the practice of particular virtues—courage, justice, temperance, and so on—to achieve a well-defined moral end, liberalism begins with wholly abstract principles or "rules" of reasoning (of which Kant's categorical imperative is perhaps the purest example), and regards the content of particular virtues and moral ends as secondary and relative. And where Aristotle consciously reasoned from a specific cultural tradition, liberalism typically aspires to formulate abstract, universally valid principles of moral reasoning. In *After Virtue,* MacIntyre puts the case for Aristotle and against liberal individualism, ending with the haunting suggestion that "we are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."

As it happens, MacIntyre later came to find the original St. Benedict more persuasive than he here implies. In the opening pages of his new book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,[1] the latter-day Marxist turned Aristotelian declares himself "an Augustinian Christian." But the broad appeal of *After Virtue* lay less in any proposed saviors than in the extremity of its diagnosis. Beginning with the "disquieting suggestion" that the language of morality today is in a state of "grave disorder," that it consists of little more than half-understood fragments salvaged from a disrupted tradition, MacIntyre charged that "we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." Though we are mostly unaware of this moral poverty, we are nonetheless "all already in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies for it." Hence MacIntyre concludes by recommending his version of counter-cultural withdrawal. "What matters at this stage," he writes, "is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and the moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."

As MacIntyre was quick to acknowledge, many of his dour pronouncements in *After Virtue* deliberately echo Nietzsche. The foundation of moral discourse has been shattered ("God is dead"); culture has lost its moorings; values have become increasingly arbitrary and pointless; the optimistic ideals of liberalism have shown themselves to be hypocritical fictions—all this repeated Nietzsche's analysis of the nihilistic bent of modern culture. But MacIntyre departed from Nietzsche in his judgment about how we should respond to the fragmentation of traditional values. Nietzsche preached a species of heroic individualism, epitomized by his doctrine of "self-overcoming," the *Übermensch,* and his vision of an ethic "beyond good and evil." MacIntyre, on the

1 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* by Alasdair MacIntyre; Notre Dame University Press, 432 pages, $22.95.

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contrary, advocated a return to community and resuscitation of the virtues as understood by Aristotle.

Moreover, MacIntyre regarded Nietzsche as a late, largely unwitting representative of the very culture that he, Nietzsche, criticized so perspicaciously: the rootless culture born of the Enlightenment with its suspicion of tradition and its faith in a putatively universal moral reasoning. MacIntyre argues that one can discern "grounds for the authority of laws and virtues" only "by entering into those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond is a shared vision of and understanding of goods." "To isolate oneself from [such] communities," he maintains, "will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside oneself." It follows that in MacIntyre's view Nietzsche's ideal of the completely autonomous, asocial individualist represents an extreme form of liberalism, not an alternative. If Aristotle is the presiding deity of *After Virtue,* Nietzsche turns out to be something closer to its resident nemesis. As MacIntyre put it in the title of one of his central chapters, the real choice is: Nietzsche or Aristotle?

Despite its sometimes aggressive polemic, however, the argument of *After Virtue* is essentially incomplete. MacIntyre himself stressed that his brief for Aristotle required a systematic account of moral reasoning if his case was to be persuasive, and that this account was left "unstated" in *After Virtue.* The book thus ends with a promissory note. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is his attempt to make good on that promise. The bulk of the book—fifteen out of twenty chapters—is devoted to a detailed examination of three distinct traditions of rational inquiry and moral reasoning: the Greek tradition that culminated in Aristotle, the Augustinian Christian tradition from its Biblical origins through Aquinas, and the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment that culminated in the skepticism of David Hume. Of course, as MacIntyre is quick to point out, this is hardly the whole story. The Islamic tradition, the Chinese and Indian traditions, the Jewish tradition: these and other major traditions of moral reasoning are left out of account here, as is the history of the Enlightenment tradition in Kant, Hegel, and their heirs.

MacIntyre's rich historical exposition displays all the erudition and philosophical subtlety that his readers have come to expect from his work. And as always, he is nothing if not clear about his likes and dislikes. Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas come in for praise, while Hume, long one of MacIntyre's villains, is repeatedly upbraided for his moral shallowness, lack of "candor," and baneful influence. Perhaps the most impressive of MacIntyre's historical chapters is "Overcoming a Conflict of Traditions," in which he recounts Aquinas's heroic integration of Aristotle and Augustine. Those acquainted with MacIntyre's work will note that Aquinas is treated with greater sympathy and depth in these pages than he was in *After Virtue.* In part, this is no doubt due to MacIntyre's recent conversion to Catholic Christianity. Given his emphasis on the importance of close-knit and like-minded communities for the propagation of traditions, it seems appropriate that MacIntyre's new faith should also find him moving from Vanderbilt University, where he has taught for the past several years, to the University of Notre Dame, where he begins teaching next year.

Whose Justice? Which Rationality? starts by iterating some of the main complaints voiced in *After Virtue.* Once again, the theme of liberal modernity's moral paralysis sounds through MacIntyre's pages. Many of us, he writes—and the burden of the argument makes one realize that he means most of us—are not "educated into . . . a coherent way of thinking and judging, but one constructed out of an amalgam of social and cultural fragments" of promiscuous origin. His chief enemy here is the "post-Enlightenment" man who finds himself bound by no tradition, recognizing no overall scheme of belief beyond "pragmatic necessity," regarding tradition as "a series of falsifying masquerades," and speaking "the interna-

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tionalized languages of modernity, the languages of everywhere and nowhere." For such deracinated—but typically modern—men, entering into any tradition appears to be an arbitrary act of will, rationally unjustified: "beliefs, allegiances to conceptions of justice, and the use of particular modes of reasoning about action will appear to [such persons] as disguises assumed by arbitrary will to further its projects, to empower itself."

Of course, the dominance of liberal individualism does not mean that other, older voices go entirely unheard. As MacIntyre notes, most of us in fact live "betwixt and between": our sense of moral reasoning is fashioned in important ways by the dominant liberal individualist ethos but also draws sustenance from "a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources." This may seem like a saving grace, but for MacIntyre the problem is that this "type of self," which "moves from sphere to sphere, compartmentalizing its attitudes," has "too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formed alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically."

There are moments when MacIntyre's polemic seems directed not so much at liberalism per se as at various extreme manifestations of the liberal spirit—at libertarianism, for example, which Allan Bloom once aptly summed up as "the right-wing form of the Left, in favor of everybody's living as he pleases." But it soon becomes clear that MacIntyre's critique of liberalism is not confined to such extreme manifestations. Again and again, he attacks liberalism's conception of an abstract "ideal rationality" that transcends social and historical context. Where traditional accounts of moral reasoning acknowledge that the "fundamental debate is between competing and conflicting understandings of rationality," liberalism "presupposes the fiction of shared, even if unformulable, universal standards of rationality." In the second edition of *After Virtue* (1984), MacIntyre had observed that "morality which is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere." In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, this theme is repeated and developed in detail. There is, writes MacIntyre, "no neutral mode of stating the problems, let alone the solutions" of morality. The concept of rational justification "is essentially historical. To justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far . . . . [I]ndeed, since there are a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality, just as it will turn out that there are justices rather than justice."

MacIntyre's main point is that we can only decide among competing moral claims from within a particular tradition, not from some ideal vantage point "outside." Any abstract digest or inventory of arguments cannot help being misleading. "Yet it is just such abstraction," MacIntyre writes, "which is enforced in the public forums of enquiry and debate in modern liberal culture, thus for the most part effectively precluding the voices of tradition outside liberalism from being heard." It is liberalism's fundamental blindness to the claims of tradition—more than any particular belief or lack of belief—that exiles it from a living appreciation of moral reasoning. As MacIntyre observes in his chapter on Aquinas:

> Modern nontheological readers of Aquinas . . . may be apt to suppose that their difficulties in coming to terms with Aquinas' relationship to tradition is a result of their alienation from his theology. In fact I suspect that it is characteristically the other way around. It is rather because the concept of tradition is so little at home in modern culture—and when it does seem to appear, it is usually in the bastardized form given to it by modern political conservatism—that they find it difficult to come to terms with Aquinas' metaphysical theology.

In this sense, MacIntyre may be said to hold that moral reasoning is *essentially* parochial. There are no *a priori* answers to

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life's fundamental moral questions. "How ought we to decide among the claims of rival and incompatible accounts of justice competing for our moral, social, and political allegiance?" MacIntyre asks. His preliminary answer is: "that will depend on who you are and how you understand yourself." It follows that in his attempt "to say both what makes it rational to act in one way rather than another and what makes it rational to advance and defend one conception of practical rationality rather than another," he will not simply propose another abstract, universal moral scheme. And it also follows that, when all is said and done, the corrosive sense of arbitrariness that modernity breeds can be defeated "only, it seems, by a change amounting to a conversion." Because liberalism presupposes a standard of moral reasoning that cannot in principle be met by any particular tradition, no *argument* for tradition will by itself be persuasive. Only a radical transformation of one's point of view—amounting, as MacIntyre observes, to a conversion—will allow "this alienated type of self" to understand, let alone embrace, the claims of a particular moral tradition. Hence only some such "conversion" will be able to defeat the threats of relativism and moral emptiness with which liberal modernity confronts us.

Now there is much to admire in MacIntyre's unflinching indictment of liberal modernity. His sensitivity to what we might call the historical embeddedness of moral traditions and his critique of the relativistic and often aggressively superficial ethic of Enlightenment liberalism make *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* a valuable contribution to our understanding of the moral fabric of modernity. Similarly, his distance from many of the reigning pieties of contemporary academic and journalistic wisdom leads to refreshingly independent judgments. What other academic moralist these days would dare to describe *The New York Times* as "that parish magazine of affluent and self-congratulatory liberal enlightenment"? Such lucidity and accuracy are rare.

But it is hardly surprising that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* has failed to attract the level of interest that *After Virtue* enjoyed. For one thing, though billed as a sequel to that book, the present volume is itself a prolegomenon of sorts, more a methodological than a substantive investigation. At one point, MacIntyre complains that in modern academic philosophy "gradually less and less importance has been attached to arriving at substantive conclusions and more and more to continuing the debate for its own sake." Perhaps so. But this only increases one's dismay when after some four hundred pages of detailed historical and philosophical argument, MacIntyre tells us that he has arrived at a point where "we have to begin speaking as protagonists of one contending party or fall silent" and then alludes casually to the possibility of an "emerging Thomistic conclusion." In other words, at the end of his book he has come to the point where he can finally begin. The fact that MacIntyre has really been speaking as a protagonist all along—mostly, to be sure, in the guise of being an *antagonist* of modern liberalism—does not provide much consolation to readers who might have hoped for more substantial, more constructive insights from this long book.

Then, too, there is the matter of the book's style. While *After Virtue* had its *longueurs,* it was written with a directness, vigor, and urgency generally lacking in its sequel. I believe MacIntyre is correct in claiming that "the conception of philosophy as essentially a semitechnical, quasi-scientific, autonomous enquiry to be conducted by professionalized specialists is in the end barren"; but I am not sure his investigations in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* entirely avoid the "semitechnical" opacities that darken so much academic writing these days. Indeed, while one applauds MacIntyre's announced ambition "to address both academic philosophers and the lay reader," one wonders what sort of "lay reader" he has in mind here. Clauses and distinctions multiply in these pages, word order strains, long-winded formulations like "tradition-

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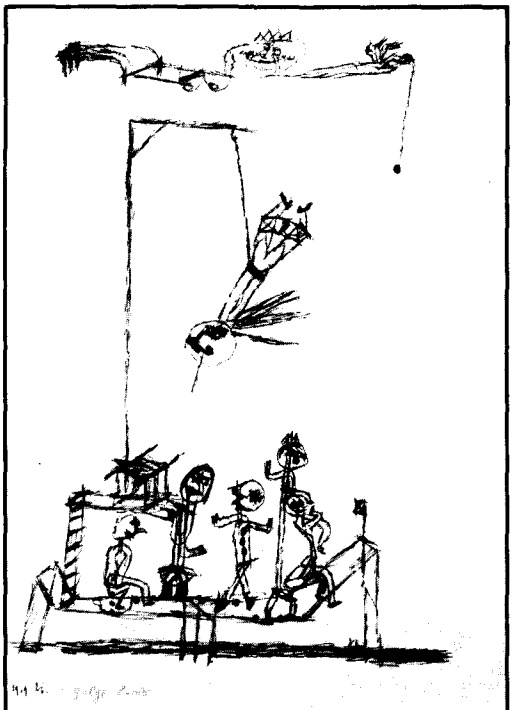
constituted and tradition-constitutive rationality" abound, making the book a stylistic disaster. Not infrequently, one finds oneself parsing MacIntyre's sentences instead of reading them.

Nor is it always clear that they do parse. "How we do in fact answer these latter questions [about practical rationality]," MacIntyre writes, "will depend in key part upon what the language is we share with those together with whom we ask them questions and to what point the history of our own linguistic community has brought us." Would anyone care to diagram this sentence? Or consider MacIntyre's explanation of how we can tell if a given text is well translated: "When someone, a text from whose first first language has been translated into his or her second first language, agrees that were he or she to translate the resultant text back into his or her first language what would then in turn result would be substantially the same as the original text, we have what is perhaps the strongest single test by which to judge a translation." This cannot be described as inviting prose.

The deeper problem with MacIntyre's analysis stems from his thoroughgoing hostility toward the modern liberal spirit in combination with a tendency to romanticize traditional modes of moral reasoning. Together, they sometimes weaken his criticisms and rob his argument of plausibility. While discussing the plight of higher education in an age hostile to tradition, for example, MacIntyre observes (ruefully, one can't help thinking) that the abolition of religious tests was at "the foundation of the liberal university." No doubt he is correct that requiring such tests for university appointments and matriculation assured "a certain degree of uniformity of belief in the way in which the curriculum was organized, presented, and developed through enquiry." And he is also correct that when religious tests were abolished universities were not suddenly transformed into institutions in which "contending and alternative points of view of rival traditions of enquiry could be systematically elaborated and evaluated."



Paul Klee, *Galgenhumor*, 1919

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The ambition to make faculty appointments solely on the basis of "scholarly competence" without regard to "considerations of belief and allegiance" has not been without its costs. Indeed, the left-liberal, relativistic sensibility now reigning in our schools and universities could hardly be more deeply entrenched, thanks in part to that ambition. But this is not to say, as MacIntyre suggests, that universities were somehow more given to entertaining rival points of view or debate about fundamental issues in the days before religious tests were abolished.

In fact, MacIntyre's remarks on the ills of higher education in the humanities can be said to epitomize both the strengths and the weaknesses of his position. He is right that the dominance of relativism in the universities has done "most harm . . . to the humanities, within which the loss of the contexts provided by traditions of enquiry increasingly has deprived those teaching the humanities of standards in the light of which some texts might be vindicated as more important than others and some types of theory as more cogent than others." Today, he observes, a student typically "emerges from a liberal education with a set of skills, a set of preferences, and little else, someone whose education has been as much a process of deprivation as enrichment."

It is difficult to disagree. But MacIntyre then goes on to castigate the so-called Great Books programs for having a smorgasbord, un-historical approach to education, an approach in which "a student moves in rapid succession through Homer, one play of Sophocles, two dialogues of Plato, Virgil, Augustine, the *Inferno,* Machiavelli, *Hamlet,* and as much else as is possible if one is to reach Sartre by the end of the semester." What this provides, he charges, is not an introduction to the culture of past traditions but "a tour through what is in effect a museum of texts." For the same reason, he dismisses as intellectually bogus the notion of "Western values" propagated by "self-proclaimed contemporary conservatives, such as William J. Bennett," who in MacIntyre's view merely represents "one more stage in modernity's cultural deformation of our relationship to the past."

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider this handful of MacIntyre's displeasures. There is no doubt that the kind of Humanities 101 survey courses that he ridicules tend to be superficial and to slight historical context. But what is the alternative? Would he prefer that students remained entirely innocent of the Western literary and philosophical heritage? Of course one might wish that students spend an entire semester each on Homer, Virgil, Plato, Dante, and so on, reading all of the works in the original language. But is that ever going to happen with more than the smallest number of students? Moreover, might it not be that those humanities survey courses in fact serve more to *introduce* than to complete a student's education, inaugurating those with the talent and disposition into the riches of the tradition?

One might raise a similar objection to MacIntyre's obiter dictum about Secretary of Education William Bennett. No one would suggest that Secretary Bennett's writings on education supply the last word on this formidably complex subject. But that is hardly the point. We live, alas, in an imperfect world, and when we come to the kinds of issues that MacIntyre raises so passionately, our concern must be not only with abstract philosophical sophistication but also with practical consequences. To quote one of MacIntyre's former heroes: What is to be done? That is the real question. Given the state of our schools and universities—given, that is to say, the very cultural fragmentation and loss of rootedness in tradition that MacIntyre bewails—are not William Bennett's proposals for educational reform and a "Great Books" approach to education steps in the right direction? They are indeed, and one cannot help noting that, for all his hostility to Secretary Bennett et alia, MacIntyre himself has failed to provide alternative proposals to improve higher education in our culture.

There is another feature of MacIntyre's argument that bears special attention. I

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believe it was William Blake who observed that an honest man may often change his opinions but never his principles. In his long journey from Marxism to Aristotelianism to Catholicism, MacIntyre has naturally had occasion to change many of his opinions. But his principles would seem to have remained largely unaltered. Already in *Against the Self-Images of the Age,* MacIntyre's 1971 collection of essays, we find him criticizing the ideal of a universal, culturally disembodied moral reasoning, insisting instead that rationality is "an inescapable sociological category," unintelligible without reference to a particular cultural and historical situation.

Even more striking is the deep suspicion of liberalism and the modern liberal state that is patent throughout MacIntyre's writings. Indeed, an avowed animus toward the ethos and principles of modern liberalism is something of a constant in his work, providing an important continuity between Marxism and his later, "conservative," writings. True, near the end of *Against the Self-Images of the Age* MacIntyre professes respect for the quintessentially liberal values of "toleration and of freedom of expression." But he then complains that "liberalism by itself is essentially negative and incomplete," explaining in one revealing passage that the precepts of liberalism "set before us no ends to pursue, no ideal or vision to confer significance upon our political action. *They never tell us what to do*" (my emphasis).

This is no doubt correct. But is it necessarily such a bad thing? Liberalism's lack of a substantive notion of the good—its inability to "tell us what to do"—undoubtedly places great moral demands upon the individual. But it may also free him from the yoke of traditions that have outlived his belief or allegiance—allowing him, for example, to move from being a skeptical Marxist to being an ardent Aristotelian to being a professing Catholic according to the dictates of his judgment. And it should also be noted that the consequences of liberalism are by no means always as gloomy as MacIntyre's analysis would lead us to believe. If liberalism is philosophically problematic, it has nonetheless proven to be extraordinarily productive politically. Indeed, among the chief *political* fruits of liberalism has been the modern, democratic state. This includes, of course, the United States, that bastion of "post-Enlightenment" men and women who, for all their rootlessness, enjoy—as MacIntyre, having chosen to live in their midst, must know—an unparalleled measure of political and social freedom.

Reflecting on MacIntyre's inquiry in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* often brought to mind a passage from Hermann Broch's great philosophical novel *The Sleepwalkers* (1932). In a series of interwoven sections entitled "The Disintegration of Values," Broch notes that in the modern age values are "no longer determined by a central authority." Like MacIntyre, Broch points out that one result of this situation is that values that were once integrated into a coherent whole begin to splinter into separate, autonomous spheres, each with its own claims and goals: "war is war, *l'art pour l'art,* in politics there's no room for compunction, business is business—all these signify the same thing, all these appertain to the same aggressive and radical spirit." But unlike MacIntyre, Broch stresses that the disintegration of values confronts individuals not only with a critical loss but also with a powerful temptation: the temptation to evade the reality and consequences of disintegration. Broch writes:

> One cannot escape from [the] brutal and aggressive logic that exhibits itself in all the values and non-values of our age . . . . [Y]et a man who shrinks from knowledge, that is to say, a romantic, a man who must have a bounded world . . . and who seeks in the past the completeness he longs for[,] has good reason for turning to the Middle Ages.

From the perspective afforded by Broch's meditations, Alasdair MacIntyre appears to be something of a romantic—a severe, Thomistic sort of romantic, admittedly, but nevertheless someone quite different from

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the "conservative" his recent conversions to traditional moral doctrines have led many (even, perhaps, MacIntyre himself) to assume. In recoiling from the fragmentation of values that characterizes modernity, MacIntyre has presented less an alternative to the depredations of liberal individualism than an escape from its challenges. For better or worse, we modern men *are* cautious, as Nietzsche said; we hesitate before bestowing unconditional Yeas or Nays because we see in such professions the possibility of enchantment and deception as well as salvation. MacIntyre's professions have made him a stern and often insightful critic of liberal modernity. But they have also prevented him from doing justice to its achievements.

Daddy dearest

Musa Mayer Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston by His Daughter. Knopf, 215 pages, $30
Eleanor Munro Memoir of a Modernist's Daughter. Viking, 271 pages, $18.95

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

Fathers never know how they'll be remembered by their scribbling children. Auguste Renoir got off easy in the hands of his son Jean, while John Cheever was exposed by his daughter as a philandering bisexual. Poor William Saroyan: he was vilified by Aram as a compulsive gambler, an exploitative husband, and (Aram knew how to hit where it hurts) a lazy thinker who had never read a book all the way through. Anonymous dads have been vaulted into fame by sensitive sons—Geoffrey Wolff's father was a no-good con man—while great men have had their names sullied by resentful urchins eager for a little attention. Bertrand Russell may have been a progressive thinker, but not when it came to marriage; his daughter Katharine had nothing but pity for his wives—all four of them. One tends to approach children's memoirs of their parents in a spirit of caution, for revenge is often their not-so-ulterior motive. Most of these books are poor (and spiteful) country cousins to that classic of filial memoirs, Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son.*

Musa Mayer has given us a serpent's tooth of a book in *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston by His Daughter.* It opens in Woodstock, New York, in July 1980, a month after Guston's fatal heart attack at age sixty-six, with his daughter sitting alone in his studio, poring over stacks of faded press clippings in an attempt "to learn about my father's life." Yet as the book unfolds, Guston's hardscrabble youth in Los Angeles, his early embrace of social realism, his rise to prominence with the Abstract Expressionists, his controversial return to figuration—all this becomes mere backdrop to the baroque spectacle of Mayer's struggle for her father's approval and affection. The point of *Night Studio* is not to illumine the artist's achievements but to catalogue the sufferings of Guston *fille.*

To be sure, Guston was hardly a model papa. Anxious, brooding, preoccupied by his work (what artist isn't?), he felt uneasy with the burdens of fatherhood and was unwilling to place his daughter's needs before his own. The prospect of her birth apparently filled him with dread; when his pregnant wife returned home from a shopping trip one day with a batch of new baby clothes, he hurled them into a closet in a fit of disgust. "He didn't want children," Musa McKim Guston, the artist's wife, bluntly tells her only child. "His work, well—you know. It was everything." Guston's moodiness only enhanced his daughter's feelings for him. She grew up longing for invitations to his studio, for quiet moments alone with him. When he won the Prix de Rome in 1948 and set off to Italy for a year, he sent her toy soldiers for Christmas, the only "bright spot in that year," she recalls.

Coupled with her affection for her father was enormous resentment. Reading *Night Studio* is like eavesdropping on a marathon therapy session; the author, a counselor by training, finds no hurt too small to dismiss. Once, for instance, her father made her a

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cookie in the shape of a horse, but refused to let her eat it; instead he hung it up, and admired his own handiwork. On another occasion, when young Musa attempted a still life and asked her father for his opinion of it, Guston told her gently, "I don't mean to hurt you, darling . . . but that's simply not painting." Offenses such as these don't exactly qualify as acts of child abuse, but Mayer, who's in her mid-forties, treats them as if they did. "Being a good father certainly was the least of his concerns," she writes with characteristic self-righteousness. "While being a good daughter was . . . the greatest of mine."

Guston wasn't much more dependable as a husband than he was as a father. *Night Studio* is dedicated to Musa McKim Guston, who's depicted in its pages as a meek, saintly woman content to spend her hours emptying ashtrays, screening her husband's phone calls, leaving egg-salad sandwiches and thermoses of black coffee outside his studio door. The quintessential artist's wife, she gave up her painting career to minister to her husband, only to be rewarded with his depressions, drinking, and habitual womanizing. Twice he ran off with other women, and he stayed away for as long as a year before returning home. Musa, his muse, forgave him for everything. When he died, she found herself fantasizing about the old Hindu custom of suttee, in which a wife lies down beside her husband on his funeral pyre. "I would like to have done that," she later told her daughter.

Night Studio has an undeniable vividness. After I finished it, I kept thinking of Guston sitting up all night at his kitchen table, chain-smoking Camels, his bloodshot eyes ringed in darkness. Mayer makes you feel for Guston, and for herself and her mother, too. Yet a major problem with the book is that it offers little more than snapshots of distress. We don't learn anything about Guston's career beyond the most skeletal details, and divorced from his achievements, Guston could be anyone; he comes across as a generic suffering artist. When Mayer ventures away from home turf and tries to capture the New York art scene, she's not in control of her subject. In 1963 she attended a Christmas party at Mark and Mel Rothko's Manhattan town house: "They seemed to have everything, I remember thinking . . . . But then, seven years later, Mark Rothko shot himself." Rothko didn't shoot himself; he slit his wrists. It's hard to know which is more offensive—this misstatement or the way the author slyly saved it for the last line of a chapter, squeezing every possible ounce of melodrama out of Rothko's death.

For all its obvious limitations, *Night Studio* is the first book to offer a glimpse at Guston's private life. He's always been known, compared to the other Abstract Expressionists, as a model of sanity: a warm, enthusiastic teacher held in high esteem by his students, a sensitive intellectual who hung out with poets and whom Philip Roth once dedicated a novel to. (If you don't think that's a telling detail, just try to imagine Roth dedicating a novel to Jackson Pollock.) Reading *Night Studio,* you realize that Guston was as haunted as anyone. In matters of self-destruction, he had few rivals; he continued drinking, and smoking sixty cigarettes a day, even after a first heart attack nearly killed him.

Knowing this, you begin to understand why Guston's abstractions never really satisfied him, and why he eventually stopped working in that vein. *Painting,* a large, pink-hued Guston in the Museum of Modern Art, from 1954, consists of thousands of short, stubby strokes clustered densely together. These strokes gravitate toward the center of the painting, like shreds of colored iron pulled by a magnet. A central image threatens to erupt, but never does; you sense that the artist was looking for a core, for something solid—a form, a form of expression—only to have his efforts reduced to so many broken, disconnected gestures. Guston couldn't find what he was looking for, not through abstraction anyway, and that's probably why the bundles of strokes in the middle of the painting are painted a deep, violent red. It's almost as if he was depend-

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ing on color to do his work for him, to endow the painting with the emotional force he was obviously striving for, but that he couldn't achieve through gesture alone.

Musa Mayer was going through her father's desk one day when she came across something he once wrote in the Seventies:

> American Abstract art is a lie, a sham, a cover-up for a poverty of spirit. A mask to mask the fear of revealing oneself. A lie to cover up how bad one can be . . . . What a sham! Abstract art hides it, hides the lie, a *fake!* Don't! Let it show! It is an escape from the true feelings we have, from the "raw," primitive feelings about the world—and us in it. In America.
>
> Where are the wooden floors—the light bulbs—the cigarette smoke? Where are the brick walls? Where is what we feel—without notions—ideas—good intentions? No, just conform to the banks—the plazas—monuments to the people who own this country—give everyone the soothing lullaby of "art."

This is a rather amazing statement. At first, it smacks of rank philistinism, of the kind of suspicion of abstract art often voiced in the Fifties by critics like Emily Genauer, who thought of abstraction as so much empty pattern. Guston didn't really hate abstract art. What he hated was that he lacked the gift for formal invention that could have allowed him to discover in his work—his abstract work, that is—the emotional authenticity he admired, and perhaps envied, in the work of Pollock or de Kooning. It must have bothered him to hear his abstractions described as minor; it bothered him because it was true.

And so, in 1968, he stopped painting abstract pictures and returned to figuration. He eventually created a circus of cartoon freaks: hooded Klansmen, creepy black spiders, decapitated heads with gargantuan eyes and stubbly chins. Sometimes these heads are shown staring at empty bottles, or drowning in black waves, or recumbent on a hospital bed, puffing a cigarette. Clearly, there's a strong autobiographical element in these paintings; and while one is almost reluctant to draw any parallels between Guston's life and work at a time when speculation about artists' lives (particularly Picasso's) is threatening to reduce art history to a branch of the gossip industry, there can be no denying that Guston's work was motivated by an instinct for confession.

The son of a Russian immigrant, he was born Phillip Goldstein, and reportedly changed his name early on to make himself more acceptable to his non-Jewish wife and her family. He always felt ashamed of having changed his name, and his guilt was no doubt bound up with the memory of his father's suicide; when Guston was around ten, he walked into a shed and found his father, Leib Goldstein, hanging from a rope. It is a measure of the artist's self-loathing that he later depicted himself as a Klansman; *The Studio* shows a cartoon Klansman seated at an easel. In other paintings, dense tangles of human legs hang over brick walls, or hang out of the sky. Discarded shoes are piled up everywhere. Naked light bulbs dangle from ropes. These images evoke Nazi death camps, interrogation rooms, a hanging man. It was in his late paintings, which are surely his most profound, that Guston finally reconciled the violence of memory with his warm, slow, glowing way with paint.

Guston first exhibited his late figure paintings at the Marlborough Gallery in 1970, and they didn't go over well. Within the ranks of Abstract Expressionism, he was denounced as a Judas, a cynical defector to the crude style and vernacular spirit of Pop art and comic strips. After the opening, his wife jotted in her diary: "P. said Lee Krasner hadn't spoken to him at the gallery; had told someone that the work was 'embarrassing.'" Guston was hurt by the reaction to his show. Once, his daughter relates, he accepted a ride home from a party with a woman who made the mistake of telling him, while she was driving, that she preferred his abstractions to his later work. "Stop the car!" Guston shouted, jumping out in the middle of a highway.

It wasn't until after Guston's death that

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his late figure paintings finally won recognition. The other day, I received a press release from the Museum of Modern Art, where a show of Guston's drawings opens this month,[1] and read that Guston was "a singularly vital and formative influence on many of the young generation of artists working in a Neo-figurative idiom." It's a claim we've heard quite often lately, but it misses the point. It's like saying we should admire Michelangelo because he spawned Pontormo and the Mannerists.

About six pages into her memoir, Musa Mayer recounts a "pilgrimage" she made to California a few years ago to learn about her father's past. Guston had never introduced his daughter to any of his brothers or sisters; he had severed all relations with his family after moving to New York. In Los Angeles, Mayer tracked down a cousin who knew her father as a child. "Philip always had a pencil in his hand," this cousin recalled, going on to say that Guston started drawing seriously after his father's death, as if line alone could somehow transport him away from his sorrow. It took him a whole lifetime to come to terms with his troubled past, and it's taken his daughter that long, too, though *Night Studio* is a sore reminder that it takes more than dark memories to produce art.

Eleanor Munro, like Musa Mayer, grew up in the shadow of an accomplished father. He wasn't famous, but Thomas Munro, a writer and art educator, couldn't have loomed larger in his daughter's imagination had he been Zeus. She perceived him as a figure of daunting erudition and refinement, a colossus of culture who spoke flawless French, loved opera, and could recite Kipling and Longfellow from memory. Family evenings in Cleveland, Ohio, were spent listening to records from her father's encyclopedic collection—Bach, Chinese flutes, readings of Whitman and Shakespeare. When Munro and her family went for a hike, her father would have them march in step to the names of heroes: "U...lys...ses... Pro...metheus... We walk in their tracks."

All this passed for the stuff of greatness in the eyes of the young Eleanor Munro, who grew up both revering her father and resenting his powerful hold on her. Her *Memoir of a Modernist's Daughter,* which is described on the dust jacket as a "pilgrimage toward self-liberation," is intended as the story of how she broke free of her father's influence. As long as she continued to idolize him, she felt diminished, unable to gauge her own talents or act on them. "My ignorance," she tells us, ". . . felt bottomless." The task she set for herself in writing her memoir was to knock the pedestal from beneath her father and bring him down to size.

Who was this Thomas Munro? For a while he worked in the education department of the Cleveland Museum of Art, where he instituted Saturday-morning art classes for schoolchildren, "model programs copied across the nation," according to his daughter. Later he edited a publication called *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* "setting up a worldwide network of estheticians which extended even behind the Iron Curtain." He also wrote several books on aesthetics, which were "monumental, plain-spoken, near-universal in detail." To be sure, Thomas Munro, a disciple of John Dewey who viewed the arts as a vehicle for social improvement, was respected in his time as the author of *The Arts and Their Interrelations* (1949); yet his daughter's stardust descriptions of his works do little to help us understand why. Adulation takes the place of analysis on virtually every page of her book.

Munro's real subject, she tells us in the preface, is the difficulty of growing up "in the shadow of an intellectually confident father rooted in ideology." Yet we never really learn what ideology she's referring to. Munro is much less interested in defining her father's ideas than in simply celebrating "the breadth and richness of his mind." She's proud of how cultured he was. He worked in an "enormous" office, "surround-

1 "The Drawings of Philip Guston" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art from September 8 through November 1.

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ed by thousands of volumes on all the works of man, with eighteenth-century music on the phonograph." Once, as a youth, he and some friends were attending a garden party in Greenwich Village when it started to rain: "They all stripped off their clothes . . . and danced in the wet grass . . . . To be naked was exalting and brought to mind the noble shapes of Phidias and Rubens." Culture is everywhere and nowhere in this book, alluded to a thousand times but never probed or pondered.

In 1952, Munro settled in New York and found herself a job as an editorial assistant at *Art News* magazine. There she met Alfred Frankfurter, the editor and publisher. The last third of Munro's *Memoir,* a chronicle of her short marriage to Frankfurter (he died in 1965), is supposed to reveal how Munro's feelings for her father trapped her into marriage with a man just like him, one she found brilliant despite his old-fashioned ideas about women. (And he was old-fashioned. Before they were married, Frankfurter once wrote her in a love letter, " I want, I really want, to delegate you to our home, its decoration, the shape of our social life . . . .") Yet, here again, Munro has not sufficiently distanced herself from her subject to endow it with interest. After all these years, she seems to be still in awe of Frankfurter, and the claims she makes on behalf of his reputation are rather grandiose:

> Under his direction, *Art News* had been a catapult lifting the Abstract Expressionists to fame . . . . The role *Art News* played in those events has been almost entirely passed over by today's art historians and even, to their discredit, by some who lived through them . . . . [Thomas B.] Hess, whose reputation would soar in later decades, was the angel behind the new movement, but he was backed up and goaded on by Frankfurter, whose tough expertise and roots in the wider art world were critical to the movement's success.

It's hardly a secret that *Art News,* under Frankfurter's direction, was notoriously *hostile* to the Abstract Expressionists until the late 1940s, when Hess joined the staff. Hess was indeed an ardent champion of the Abstract Expressionists, a collector of their work, and he wrote the first book about them, in 1951. Nevertheless, it wasn't *Art News* that first introduced the painters to the public; it was Clement Greenberg, writing in *The Nation* and *Partisan Review*; it was *Life* and *Time,* responding to Greenberg's articles. *Art News* was a latecomer. For Munro to claim that Frankfurter not only elevated the Abstract Expressionists to fame, but that the movement as a whole could not have succeeded without him—this is simply rubbish.

Munro, who's around sixty, writes like a wide-eyed schoolgirl bedazzled by the big outside world. Part of her realizes that neither her father nor Frankfurter were model human beings; her father, she concedes, was a narrow-minded thinker who opposed integration of the public schools and bristled at the notion of her marriage to a Jew. Frankfurter, by comparison, was a tireless opportunist who often used his writing to win social influence with people like the Rothschilds and the Sitwells. Yet for all the shortcomings of these two men, Munro in the end can't help being seduced by the illusion of security—and cultural superiority—they afforded her. "Our father's work and taste set us apart," she smugly notes, speaking for herself and her siblings. Eleven pages later, she visits the home of a high-school classmate in Shaker Heights, a wealthy suburb. The fathers there, compared to her own, "did not come down hard on ideas they disagreed with, having none of their own." This is an offensive statement, and it reminded me of something Delmore Schwartz once said: there's nothing so great about ideas; taxi drivers have them, too.

In the preface to her *Memoir,* Munro states that her book is intended as a female equivalent of Gosse's *Father and Son.* There's a wonderful moment in that book when the young Gosse, who was warned by his parents never to worship anyone or anything but God, puts their religious beliefs to a test. After waiting for his parents to safely leave

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the house, he places a chair on a table, kneels down before it, and says his daily prayer, addressing it to "O Chair" instead of to God. Then he waits nervously for something bad to happen. But nothing does. It was a tiny act of defiance, but it shook his faith in his father forever. Perhaps Eleanor Munro needs to get down on her knees and say an "O Chair."

Glasnost, ho!

Anatoli Rybakov Children of the Arbat. Translated by Harold Shukman. Little, Brown, 800 pages, $19.95

reviewed by David Gurewich

One of the stock routines of Soviet spokesmen is parading the numbers of American authors that are translated and published in the USSR, and bemoaning the lack of reciprocity on the American side. "We publish Hemingway, Faulkner, and Jack London," they say. "What Soviet authors have you published?" *Translation*: What have you done for peace and disarmament lately?

Well, first (you could reply), it took Hemingway and Faulkner forty and fifty years, respectively, to break through the Iron Curtain. What is more, they are the exceptions. A far more typical Soviet offering of modern American fiction is *Deadeye Dick* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The Soviet edition comes, incidentally, with a thoughtful foreword (as is the custom with books *d'estime*) that discusses Mr. Vonnegut's philosophy more solemnly than *The New York Review of Books* ever did.

Second, the question implies that American publishing, like its Soviet counterpart, is run along ideological lines. But this is mostly nonsense. While an argument can be made that it is easier to publish a serious novel in the United States if its politics are left of center, in reality the political platform of an American publisher is the best-seller list, dominated by sagas and epics and other "big books." So, when it comes to publishing Soviet books, the key is to find a Big Russian Novel that has been suppressed for twenty years (a surefire way to acquire solid ideological credentials) and then time its publication to a summit. Do I hear Lara's Theme as performed by cash registers?

Antoli Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat* fits into this pipe dream well. It's a big, sprawling epic that should come with an appendix listing its characters—to help the conscientious reader tell Vanya from Varya. And it is so politically correct, *glasnost*-style, as to put callouses on your palms from nonstop clapping. It is also not a bad book, although you wouldn't know it from the translation.

First, a bit of background, especially since the novel is so patently autobiographical. Mr. Rybakov was born in Chernigov, a heavily Jewish Ukrainian town, and grew up in the old Moscow intelligentsia neighborhood of Arbat. Like his hero, Sasha Pankratov, he attended the Institute of Transport, was framed in a mini-show trial, and exiled to Siberia. During the war, he was an officer in charge of transport maintenance. After, he became a successful writer, both with the public, via his thrillers for children, like *The Dirk* and *The Adventures of Krosh,* and with the state, via his "serious" novels, like *Yekaterina Voronina* and *The Drivers.* For the latter he was awarded the Stalin (now called the State) Prize in Literature in 1951.

In the foreword to the 1964 edition of *The Drivers,* a Soviet critic wrote that Rybakov was "still in love with the beauty of the people's cause, with the poetry of human labor." (Now, that's praise!) And, indeed, his books up to this point were anything but politically daring. They were duly translated into a number of languages, three of them were made into movies, and two editions of collected works—one in two volumes, another in four—were published. In the Soviet system, you cannot go much higher.

In the Sixties, encouraged by the "thaw," Rybakov started working on the *real* story of his generation—one of inane Party meetings and the fear of finding yourself in the wrong

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faction; one of dank NKVD cells, of Kafka-like interrogations where you had to create your own crime, of long Siberian exile. But most of all, it is the story of rejected love—boy loves Party, but Party does not love him back.

Thaw or no thaw, Rybakov missed the boat. Twice the "thick" magazines announced the serialization of *Children of the Arbat*—first *Novy Mir,* then *Oktyabr*—and yet nothing came to pass. Apparently, the authorities had had it with the debunking of Stalin. Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich* might have appealed to Khrushchev, but it was interpreted as having been written from the point of view of the Man of the Soil. In any case, by the late Sixties, when Rybakov's novel was first to appear, Khrushchev was gone, and no one wanted to hear about how the Party had done a poor boy wrong.

In 1978, when it was time to show the Zionists that the Soviet Jews already had a Motherland, Rybakov wrote *Heavy Sand,* a novel about the Nazis' destruction of a Jewish *shtetl.* I remember picking it up with interest: after all, the subject had been taboo in Russia for thirty years. It was a disappointment. Written with a sledgehammer, the book observed every principle of socialist realism: even facing the Nazis' guns, its characters remained steadfastly Soviet. The fact of their Jewishness was incidental. They might as well have been Tatars.

And then, after many a state funeral, came Gorbachev. As Rybakov describes it, he had been courted for years by Western publishers eager for *Children of the Arbat,* but he had resisted. Now, his patience was rewarded, and the book was finally published in the Soviet Union. Reunited, the boy and the Party rode into the sunset of best-sellerdom. *Children of the Arbat*—endorsed by an inveterate champion of artistic freedom like Yevtushenko—became the publishing equivalent of the INF treaty.

The book follows the tradition of what in the West is called a "nineteenth-century novel"; as the label suggests, it is something outdated, out of touch with our "postmodernist" times. Yet in Russia, where modernism was smothered in the Thirties, the grand old genre never died. The history of Soviet literature (and film) is filled with updates of *War and Peace.* Some have literary claims, like Simonov's *Comrades in Arms*; some are plain trash, like Korolkov's *Secrets of War.* But all have been welcome, because the Party likes to think *big,* too. It likes its leaders larger than life, and it likes pan shots of the masses, whose hearts beat in unison with the general secretary's. In that sense, Rybakov followed a well-trodden path.

Despite the epic size and long cast of characters, the plot of *Children of the Arbat* is not complicated. As it opens in 1933, the author's alter ego, Sasha—tall, dark, handsome—is a student and a Komsomol (Young Communist League) secretary at the Institute of Transport. He commits two errors: one, he argues with his accounting instructor, who, Sasha feels, teaches too much Marxism and not enough accounting; two, he writes some innocent ditties and places them next to pictures of celebrated workers. Thus begin his trials: he is expelled from the Institute, then from Komsomol, and finally sentenced according to the infamous Article 58 (counter-revolutionary agitation) and exiled to Siberia, with little chance of returning to his beloved Arbat.

Rybakov repeatedly hints that Sasha is a Moscow street-smart kid; he puts him in a couple of fights (for a good cause, to be sure) and even has him curse a little. But these scenes come off sounding like the dreams that boys from nice families have of holding their own with street toughs. If anything, Sasha is a starry-eyed idealist who believes in the Party and, more dangerously, in its justice—and so, to a point, do his friends.

Unfortunately, none of these "children of the Arbat" is very exciting. Any New York editor could have told Rybakov that in this kind of novel "the reader must care about his characters." Or at least that the characters should be interesting. But being young and in love with the bright future promised by the Party—as Rybakov's characters are—

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just isn't good enough. Rybakov tries desperately for interest, anyway: he fills the book with all sorts of touches that, although guaranteed to shock the Soviet reader, can hardly fascinate a Western one. There is a scene of an abortion by way of a mustard bath; there is Sasha's sometime girlfriend, a promiscuous, hard-drinking factory girl; there are pool hustlers and "restaurant girls" in both seedy and glitzy nightclubs; in Siberia, we even meet a priest with a heart of gold. This is not a Russia that the Soviet reader is used to seeing in print. Yet Rybakov seldom strays from the Party line—or, to be more precise, from the hard-edged morality of his generation. Honest work is a virtue that always gets rewarded; the hustlers always fall.

And symbolism abounds. Take Yuri Sharok, the black sheep of the crowd: his father, a tailor, hates the Bolsheviks for depriving him of a profitable business (the Party line on *perestroika* might make Rybakov more tolerant of small businessmen in the sequel) and dreads the tax inspector; his older brother is a jewel thief. Yuri himself has a deep-seated plebeian hatred for his well-born classmates, which becomes his motivation in joining the NKVD. *Translation*: the Great Terror was not the doing of the Party; it was done *to* the Party by malcontents like Yuri. His first informer on the job is, of course, a "fallen" daughter from a *kulturny* family who has no interests outside buying imported clothes and finding a rich husband.

Clearly, Rybakov has not fallen out of love with the "beauty of labor"; he has merely found ways to make it more commercial than it was in his Stalin Prize novels. The aesthetic and ideological baggage he has amassed during his career is also reflected in his attitude toward anti-Semitism. In *Children of the Arbat,* the socialist-realist decorum is still in force: the Arbat crowd is solidly Russian. In view of the ethnic makeup of the Moscow intelligentsia, this is enough to raise anyone's eyebrows. The only anti-Semites in the book are the Sharoks and a former chef in the Tzar's court, i.e., "backward elements" who are against the Party, too. Under the Party's aegis, the Jews obviously have nothing to worry about. *Highlight*: a minor character named Frida wants to go to Palestine. *Translation:* a few Jews want to be in Israel, and not always for anti-Soviet reasons. (Whether Frida shows up in the sequel will no doubt depend on whether the USSR re-establishes diplomatic relations with Israel.)

Once Sasha gets to Siberia, the novel improves. Rybakov still cannot avoid clichés, rooted in the image of Siberia as the Last Frontier, but somehow the scenes become cleaner and less contrived. Sasha's education proceeds at a clip—he discovers that priests, anarchists, and other "enemies" are people, too! This is the kind of revelation that is sure to stun the Soviet public, even if a sophisticated reader may be jarred by our hero's persistent juvenility.

Rybakov's characters, then, are often schematic and none too bright, and their morals are firmly anchored in what's good for the Party. Nevertheless, there are some scenes in the book that will impress even the Western reader. When it comes to describing the NKVD-Party plots, Rybakov rides strong, wedding his thriller-writer expertise with an intimate knowledge of the system. His choice of genre works to his advantage here, too. The absurdity of totalitarian injustice has become a cliché in modern writing. But a well-constructed epic must show no loose threads, and so Sasha's arrest is not a mere case of a mislaid file—it is part of a much larger NKVD intrigue. "Your exile is an intraparty affair," Sasha is told by Alferov, a sympathetic NKVD officer and one of the book's more memorable characters. "You found yourself in a certain situation, and behaved imprudently."

As Rybakov spins the web of the coming purge, the action shifts to the spider—the Great Leader himself. Rybakov's portrait of Stalin does not match Solzhenitsyn's in *The First Circle*—Solzhenitsyn can convey in a sentence an effect that Rybakov would spend a page to achieve—but it's not for lack of trying. This is by far the longest Stalin por-

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trait I've ever read. And Rybakov has done his homework: while Stalin's musings on power are not terribly original, the sheer volume of the anecdotes about his childhood (even his maudlin poetry is quoted), his exile, and his constant fracases with other, better-educated Party leaders (who had always looked down on him) makes for highly entertaining reading.

Now and then the reader gets the chill of what it must be like to be next to despotic power, used with such seeming petulance and with such cold calculation. In an excellent episode, Stalin praises his dentist for a good job the latter did; the same day, he finds out that the dentist chatted with Kirov, whose assassination Stalin is plotting. "Yes, he [the dentist] was talkative," Stalin tells Kirov, with "indifference." Rybakov adds: "This kind of indifference on Stalin's part was . . . something Kirov was very familiar with." Minutes later, Stalin orders that the dentist be dismissed. You can't help feeling grateful to the tyrant for not having the poor man shot. Later in the book, Ordzhonikidze is said to have a "precise understanding of Stalin's attitude to Kirov. He knew Stalin well and knew what it meant when Stalin spoke to someone without looking at him." By now, we know as well as Ordzhonikidze does that Kirov is doomed. This is as heady as *The Godfather,* and very different from the kind of thing you get in a White House kiss-and-tell memoir.

And yet, page after page, Rybakov pounds on the tired thesis: Stalin is not the Party. Ordzhonikidze and Kirov, indefatigable organizers, *are* the Party, especially the latter, who is described with almost religious piety, a piety heightened by our knowledge of his impending martyrdom. But Ordzhonikidze and Kirov—unlike Zinoviev and Kamenev, or, God forbid, Trotsky himself—are safe saints for a Party writer: they have already been eulogized. And Stalin was accused of murdering Kirov as far back as 1956.

As I write this, the papers bring the news that the Zinoviev and Kamenev verdicts have been annulled in Moscow. It seems that *glasnost* is outpacing Rybakov's expanding loyalties.

Rybakov writes brisk and peppy dialogue, with the well-caught wise-guy inflection of the Moscow street. His language is not the richest, but is perfectly functional: it neither jars nor gets in the way of the narrative. In fact, *Children of the Arbat*—a prime candidate for the first *glasnost* mini-series—could make quite acceptable airplane reading, were it not for the translation. Part of the problem is common to all translations from the Russian. Perhaps because so many translators come from academe, most Russian writing, no matter how slangy, reads in translation like "Masterpiece Theatre." This tendency to elevate style a notch or two is poison to many Russian writers, who, used to popular appeal, secretly wonder why their books are suddenly viewed as Art. But they rarely complain, since being translated into English is like manna from heaven. So the misperception persists.

In the case of *Children of the Arbat,* the problem is needlessly exacerbated. Not only is Mr. Shukman's English stuffy and dusty; it is unidiomatic. What would you think of characters who constantly greet each other by saying, literally, "Greetings!"? (I couldn't help thinking of the Conehead family from the old *Saturday Night Live.*) Is an abhorrent coinage like "citizeness"—i.e., a woman citizen—necessary? My personal favorite is "the handles in this car are very uncooperative." This is English with a Hollywood-movie Russian accent.

On top of such oddities, Mr. Shukman's knowledge of colloquial Russian is utterly inadequate. There is no such place as Kudykin Hill in Moscow: "na kudykinu goru" is a folksy parental dismissal of a child's nagging question, "kuda?" ("where to?") and means "don't bug me." "Shef-povar" does not mean "cook and chauffeur"; it means a chef, pure and simple. "Ne gorit" does not mean "there is no fire anywhere"; it means "it is not urgent." The mysterious card game he calls "preference" is known in the West as "whist," a predecessor of bridge. The list goes on, with entire situations misrepresented completely because crucial words are mistranslated.

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What is one ultimately to make of *Children of the Arbat?* The book's phenomenal success in the USSR stems largely from its political importance. One may even speculate that the decision to publish the book was an attempt to suppress the yearning for Solzhenitsyn's works, which are still banned. And indeed, after Rybakov's book, Soviet readers will regard Solzhenitsyn differently; the shock of discovery will be dulled. (Interestingly, the sequel to *Children of the Arbat,* expected to appear later this year, is rumored to be titled *1935*, inviting comparison with Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel* trilogy titles: *1914, 1915,* etc.)

On the American side, some critics may now feel a bit cheated—at least those who hoped both to be enthralled by new writing in the classical Russian moral tradition and to feel good about the Soviets again. The media stories and lavish promotion promised a new Russian writer who is as much a part of the Soviet system as they are part of the American one—unlike Solzhenitsyn, who, with his fire and brimstone, has become an embarrassment. But such hopes were not well founded. Rybakov is a strong commercial writer, but he has none of Solzhenitsyn's firepower, and, to use a Marxist shibboleth, he is very much a finished product of his environment. In the midst of a choked description of Kirov, Rybakov has Kirov muse about how Leningrad workers in the Twenties went out on a limb for the Party, sending the *dvadtzatipyatitysyachniki* (twenty-five thousand workers) to help with collectivization. It never occurs to Kirov/Rybakov (the loving description suggests total identification) that the twenty-five thousand were, in fact, punitive troops, whose purpose was to extort grain from the farmers.

The ending of the book provides a revealing glimpse of Soviet and American publishing realities. The American version ends in 1934 with Kirov assassinated, Sasha still in exile, and a gloomy forecast of "the dark days ahead." The Russian edition, however, contains an epilogue, a happy ending of sorts, where Sasha is reunited with one of the "children of the Arbat" on a battlefield in World War II. According to Roger Donald, Rybakov's editor at Little, Brown, the epilogue's deletion from the American edition was made with the author's approval. In any case, the logic behind the Soviet edition is familiar. The author and his Soviet editor needed to justify the "official" description of the book. It can be found, as it is in every Soviet book, at the end, in lieu of dust-jacket copy. The one for *Children of the Arbat* reads: "Despite the tragic nature of the events described, the novel is optimistic, reinforcing our deep conviction in the ideological and moral values of the Soviet people." *Plus ça change . . .*

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Letters

Whittaker Chambers's "Witness"

To the Editors:

Having read Hilton Kramer's reference in the March issue of *The New Criterion* to my review of Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* ("The Faiths of Whittaker Chambers," *The New York Times Book Review,* May 25, 1952), I re-read what I wrote. There are many things that I have published in the past which, in the light of further reflection and subsequent experience, I would have liked to modify and correct. But I would not alter a line of what I wrote about *Witness* and Chambers, both in praise and in criticism. (Today I would only add a footnote expressing the hope that *Witness* would be on the required reading list of any course in the political history of the twentieth century.)

What I found startling about Mr. Kramer's discussion was his failure adequately to present the views of Chambers that I criticized in my review, the grounds of my criticism, and the evidence bearing on what is and isn't an intelligent guide to defending freedom against Communism. I do not in any way disagree with Mr. Kramer in his assessment of the heroic character of Whittaker Chambers—indeed, for reasons I make clear in my autobiography, *Out of Step,* I was in a better position than most to appreciate Chambers's heroism. I agree with Lionel Trilling that Chambers was "a man of honor." I regret that Diana Trilling—writing about Chambers in your May issue—does less than justice to herself in now contesting that judgment. That was not always her view.

When he wrote *Witness,* Chambers was convinced that the great political divide in the United States and elsewhere was between, on the one hand, socialist reform, the New Deal, and Communism in all its varieties, and, on the other, a faith in human freedom rooted in a firm belief in the existence of God. In this he was demonstrably mistaken. Indeed, until the Communist International adopted the Popular Front strategy in 1935, the New Dealers and Roosevelt were denounced as fascists by the Communists, or on the way to becoming such. I remember how intensely Rexford G. Tugwell and other New Deal "brain trusters" were annoyed by Communist criticism. They didn't like Communists, but—and this is crucial—they didn't regard them as enemies. In fact, in their innocence they looked on them as liberals in a hurry—impatient, youthful idealists. They appreciated the zeal of the Communists, their sometimes sacrificial zeal in behalf of good causes; but they dismissed their doctrinal zealotry as overblown rhetoric.

Most of the genuine New Dealers had not the foggiest notion of what actual conditions in the Soviet Union were like, or about the "theological differences" (their favorite phrase) among the Communist factions. All they knew is what they learned from a continuous barrage of Communist propaganda, reinforced by the reports of pious pilgrims who said that the Soviet Union had a planned economy, no unemployment, great engineering works. The New Dealers didn't approve of Communist violence, but at the time it was Hitler who seemed to be threatening the peace of Europe. Although they were very hostile

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to Franco, who was being aided by Mussolini and Hitler, they did not oppose the Neutrality Resolution that was adopted with the approval, if not instigation, of the Roosevelt administration. The Resolution made it impossible for the legally recognized Spanish Republic to purchase arms in the United States; this compelled the Republican Spanish regime to turn to the Soviet Union for military aid, for which Stalin exacted the price of NKVD hegemony and the Spanish gold supply.

In 1938, when Chambers broke with Communism and emerged from its underground in search of a public character that would give him safety, he certainly did *not* believe what he wrote in 1952: that liberalism, socialism, and the New Deal were akin to Communism, all on the same side of the line dividing the Free World from totalitarianism. The notion was absolutely absurd then and has remained absurd. As I pointed out in my review, Chambers's classification of liberals, socialists, and humanists with Communists was as irresponsibly false and dangerous as the earlier Communist classification of the same groups with fascists. (Stalin's theory of social-fascism had been de rigueur for all Communists, including Chambers, until 1935.)

Nor did Chambers believe in this fantasy when, on September 2, 1939, without any guarantee of immunity from criminal prosecution for his own underground activities, he identified some twenty members of Communist Party cells who had acquired strategic posts in the American government. This was the first and most important of Chambers's heroic actions. Its one fortunate consequence was that Adolf Berle, an assistant secretary of state at the time, kept notes of the meeting. Their content makes utterly ridiculous the charge that Hiss's trial *ten years later* was a frame-up. No one in his wildest fantasy could have anticipated the myriad of fortuitous circumstances that led Hiss to file a libel suit against Chambers. Had he not done so, the damning evidence of his guilt would not have come to light.

It was not Chambers who first publicly identified Hiss as an underground member of the Communist Party but Elizabeth Bentley, who had also served in the Communist underground. Chambers was formally subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities because it was aware of his previous testimony to Berle and others. As brave and honorable as Chambers was, I doubt that he (or any other person I know) would have accepted the subpoena if he had had any conception of what he and his family were fated to endure in consequence of his truthful testimony. At the time, the Cold War had already become acute. The situation in Berlin was already so inflamed by the Soviet blockade that the outbreak of hostilities with the Soviet Union seemed imminent. (I was in Berlin that summer—the summer of 1948—at the height of the blockade; like everyone else, I was convinced that if the Russians shot down any of the American relief planes war would break out.) Chambers came forward as a witness prepared to end the few tranquil years of his life because he felt his testimony was necessary to re-acquaint the American people with the true nature of the Communist movement, which they had lost sight of during the euphoria of World War II co-belligerency. Chambers knew that his testimony meant the loss of a coveted job and the end of his career. He was prepared to accept that, as well as the obloquy of the Communist movement and its allies. He was not prepared to be treated as an enemy of mankind by the entire liberal establishment.

Truman's scoffing dismissal of the Hiss Case as a "red herring" could be viewed as a kind of political damage control. But other reactions were not so easy to explain. In the face of Hiss's conviction, the overwhelming evidence of Communist penetration, the Communist aggressions in Europe and Asia, the revelations of the Gulag, and the intensification of the Stalinist terror, Chambers could make no sense of the hysterical lynch spirit against him in the citadels of liberalism, except as an indication of the basic ideological kinship among liberals, socialists, and Communists. It was only then that liberalism and Communism seemed to become, for Chambers, members of the same ideological blood group.

I am loath to believe that Hilton Kramer accepts Chambers's view as valid. But there is no doubt that he strongly contradicts my assertion that Chambers's view is false, dangerously false, despite my recognition of the largely unpaid tribute liberals and anyone who values the truth owes to Whittaker Chambers. But then, asks Kramer: how did it happen "that the Commu-

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nists had such a free ride in the Roosevelt administration"? In my review of *Witness,* I answer that it was colossal stupidity and ignorance on the part of the New Dealers. To which I should have added a reference to their intellectual arrogance. Hilton Kramer dismisses my explanation as "not very persuasive." Indeed, to him my answer is "tantamount to abandoning the whole question."

My answer may not be persuasive but, nonetheless, it is true. There is considerable evidence for it which Mr. Kramer ignores. And it is undoubtedly truer as an explanation of the ease and magnitude of Communist penetration than Chambers's desperate surmise that the New Dealers and the Communists were members of the same ideological family.

Then there is my second main criticism of the doctrinal message of *Witness*—Chambers's belief that only a return to God and religious faith could save the Free World. According to Chambers, "faith is the central pattern of this age," and it is religious faith that is the best—indeed, the only—defense against the triumph of Communism. I disputed this on various grounds, among them that in a world of divided religious faiths one could not fashion an effective unity. I declared, in a passage quoted by Mr. Kramer, that "it is not unlikely that the [secular] humanistic spirit may be the best defense on a world scale against the Communist crusade because it can unite all human beings who, despite their religious differences on first or last things, value truth, justice, kindness and freedom among all men." Hilton Kramer comments ironically:

> Now, over a third of a century later, I think it would be accurate to say that the "spirit" so fondly invoked by Sidney Hook in his review of *Witness* has not proven to be much of a defense at all . . . . History, as a matter of fact, has proved Chambers to have been right about many things, and *Witness* remains not only one of the few indispensable autobiographies ever written by an American . . . but the very thing that Sidney Hook said it wasn't: "an intelligent guide" to the victory of freedom over Communist tyranny.

Chambers, like so many others, had inherited his non-religious outlook when he became a Communist. He did not earn it. He never faced what one may call "the transcendental temptation," intelligent resistance to which results invariably in an unillusioned naturalism. Like many others, when he lost the Communist faith that had functioned like a religion in his political life, he was bereft of any foundations of belief for his new devotion to the ideals of freedom. He reached out for whatever was at hand, not realizing its logical and psychological inadequacies. From his Quaker quietism he went to a kind of Kierkegaardian existentialism, failing to understand that such a view was compatible with any kind of empirical political reality and that its God was beyond any judgment of human value. He forgot that the existentialist Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he admired, had headed the Revolutionary Policy Committee of the Socialist Party, which had opted for the "dictatorship of the proletariat"; he forgot that the existentialist Paul Tillich had sought to be selected as president of East Germany, or that Karl Barth, who excoriated Hitler, had refused to utter a word of criticism of Stalin.

Mr. Kramer is right on one point. I was unduly optimistic about the prospects of developing a universal humanist movement in defense of a free society. But what other alternative is there for any person who cannot accept the superstitions of a transcendental world, and who on incontrovertible logical grounds accepts the autonomy of moral values and principles with respect to all theological and metaphysical beliefs? We don't have to agree on the existence of heaven or hell to know that a free world, despite its imperfections, is better than the despotism of its enemies.

The personal religious faith that Chambers himself espoused does him credit. He became a Quaker and, despite what his detractors said about him, he tried to live by the precepts of that religion. His remarks about Hiss in public and private showed no personal animus whatsoever. In an eloquent letter to Bertram Wolfe (June 7, 1957), Chambers wrote: "What moved me was that you noted my efforts to spare Alger." He went on to say that for him "this lies at the very heart of the meaning of the whole business. The West that I must stand for was one of a humanity that above all understands, forgives, spares . . . ."

But at the time that Chambers joined the Quakers, the Friends Service Committee was devoting its efforts to preventing England from

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resisting Hitler; it subsequently came out against the military resistance to Nazi aggression, and since the end of World War II it has played a very mischievous role, together with the Communist peace movement, in attempting to disarm the United States and to further the foreign policy goals of the Kremlin. In no country of the world does it co-operate with the forces opposing Communist tyranny to the same extent as it co-operates with Communist guerrillas struggling to impose their own ruthless, dictatorial rule over others.

What other religious movement today is engaged in a struggle to keep the West free? Catholic "liberation theology"? The Papal doctrine of the moral equivalence of Communism and capitalism? The statement of the American Catholic bishops on weapons and arms control and on the causes of poverty? I find it passing strange that any knowledgeable and critical-minded partisan of freedom in the modern world should, in light of the historical evidence, find plausible Chambers's view that only religious or transcendental faith can overcome Communism.

Sidney Hook
Hoover Institution
Stanford, CA

Reconstructing De Man

To the Editors:
Roger Kimball's response to Professor Geoffrey Hartman's shameful defense of Paul de Man deserves the thanks of all who believe that scholarship and learning bear particular, moral responsibility ("Geoffrey Hartman Reconstructs Paul de Man," May 1988). Hartman's article in *The New Republic* hardly merits the intellectually distinguished treatment Kimball gives it. For what is at stake for Hartman is Hartman's own professional standing and also his credibility as a person of moral authority within the Jewish world, a role he has actively pursued in the recent past.

Pretending to face the fact that Paul de Man was an anti-Semite and a Nazi in Belgium in World War II, Hartman in fact evades it, explains it away, gives excuses for it, trivializes it, and above all, obfuscates it. Hartman uses every trick of the trade to shift attention away from a fact he wishes would go away: that his teacher, colleague, and friend hated Jews and was a Nazi.

De Man and Hartman are leading exponents of a literary theory called "deconstructionism," which assigns to words "indeterminate meaning." In simple language: things mean what you *say* they mean. When we see how Hartman manages to explain away de Man's Nazism, we understand the moral bankruptcy of a literary theory that denies to language all integrity.

Only a literary theory that relativizes and "contextualizes" language out of all meaning can permit Hartman the self-serving, self-indulgent luxury of separating de Man's thought from his life. No person who believes in the integrity of language and morality can admire Hartman for writing this way about a vicious anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator. All the more reason for thanks to Roger Kimball for his finely crafted essay.

Jacob Neusner
The Ungerleider Distinguished Scholar of Judaic Studies
Brown University
Providence, RI

The Dalton school of hermeneutics

To the Editors:
Roger Kimball's "Guns and Other 'Hermeneutical Acts' at Columbia" (May 1988) was a personal attack on a friend of mine. May I respond?

Mr. Kimball does not know Frank Moretti, does not like him, and would hurt him if he could. I know Frank Moretti well, I have great affection and respect for him and wish him every happiness. So much for the article's substance as I read it.

Mr. Kimball mentions one genuine issue but does not explore it. A "hermeneutical act" is distinguished from other kinds of acts (aesthetic, celebratory, pragmatic, etc.) by its essential purpose. It aims to uncover the thoughts and feelings which animate people in a given situation. Such thoughts and feelings are often submerged in custom and calculation—in "the usual polite back and forth of academic debate," for example.

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If, as I believe, Mr. Kimball's dominant purpose in writing this article was to threaten Dr. Moretti's career, his act was not hermeneutical but pragmatic. On the other hand, if I am mistaken and his main intention was to get readers to reflect in illuminating ways on cultural relativism and the Sixties, his article was hermeneutical. Obviously, most acts have several aspects and genuine discussion would permit us to weigh them well.

Passing in the same spirit to the occasion itself, this much is likely to be true: when Dr. Moretti calls the guns-at-Cornell incident a "hermeneutical act" he is claiming that its essential purpose was to expose people in the situation to their underlying attitudes toward blacks, the use of force, academic traditions, the grounds of legitimacy, and so on—as opposed to shooting them. He probably intends a contrast with incidents like the police action at Sharpeville, South Africa in 1960, in which sixty-seven people were killed. That act, he would say, was more pragmatic than hermeneutical.

That contrast and those judgments are, in turn, objects for further interpretation and evaluation as their context is brought more and more to light. Some would say that the essential purpose of the armed blacks at Cornell was self-expression or intimidation. Some might say that the main purpose of the police at Sharpeville was education. All these judgments would lead to further reflection. I see no obscurity, absurdity, or conspiracy here.

If Mr. Kimball is really interested in the project of reason and wants to understand hermeneutical approaches to it, he might begin by asking himself this question: of the two incidents—Cornell and Sharpeville—which, as a matter of fact, has meant more to him? "More" might be variously and interestingly interpreted: calories expended through indignation? Number of lines read and written? Number of conversational references? Time spent in fantasy? If, as I expect, the answer is Cornell, then the next question is: why? And so on. Correspondingly inconvenient questions can be asked of anyone—for which of us is free of self-deception and conceit? The detailed exploration of such questions, undertaken in the company of friends and in the presence of the classic texts, can make the life of reason a struggle for

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something more than a confirmation of oneself. That is, in any case, the ideal of reason which Dr. Moretti teaches at the Dalton School—and it is one he actually realizes more often than most.

Thomas de Zengotita, Ph.D.
Scholar in Residence
The Dalton School
New York City

Roger Kimball replies:

I am most grateful to the Scholar in Residence at the Dalton School for his letter. In addition to providing me with an occasion to expand on one or two points I had made in "Guns and Other 'Hermeneutical Acts' at Columbia," Dr. de Zengotita's response offers readers of *The New Criterion* a more vivid instance of the politicized posturing that I described in my essay than I could hope to produce by myself.

I must begin by assuring Dr. de Zengotita that I am delighted to learn Dr. Moretti enjoys his affection, respect, and fond wishes. I am convinced that Dr. Moretti has found in Dr. de Zengotita the partisan he deserves. Perhaps this is also the place to assure Dr. de Zengotita that the critical comments I made in my essay were not meant as a personal attack on his friend. I trust that Dr. de Zengotita will allow that there is a difference between criticizing someone's ideas and a personal attack. Not being acquainted with Dr. Moretti, I have not had an opportunity to get to dislike him, and so I had no wish to attack him personally. What I did dislike very much, however, and what I vigorously responded to in my essay, were the ideas that Dr. Moretti delivered himself of that evening at Columbia—for example, his characterization of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* as "Hitleresque," his suggestion that Professor Bloom's vision of genuine intellectual community somehow conduces to "slavery," and above all his description of the student insurrection at Cornell University in 1969 as a "hermeneutical act."

I hope Dr. de Zengotita will forgive me for passing over his lecture about the meaning of the term "hermeneutical act." As he suspected, my essay was not intended to be a hermeneutical act at all. My more modest aim was to provide a faithful account of Dr. Moretti's response to my discussion of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Dr. de Zengotita's chief idea seems to be that one cannot discuss the uprising of black students at Cornell University without discussing racial violence in South Africa. Surprisingly, the subject of South Africa did not come up the evening I spoke at the Columbia seminar on Innovations in Education. Doubtless this was an oversight. I am confident that Dr. de Zengotita was right in thinking that Dr. Moretti had the subject in the back of his mind, so to speak. But why? What did the political situation in South Africa have to do with the degradation of a major American university by a group of militant, gun-toting students? The answer is, *nothing*. Police actions in Sharpeville in 1960 had no more to do with judging those events at Cornell than did police actions at that time in Moscow—to pick a venue not likely to be high on Dr. de Zengotita's index.

In order to understand why Dr. de Zengotita should have dragged South Africa into the discussion, one must realize that the words "South Africa" have degenerated into one of those talismans that liberals employ to cloak themselves with an aura of virtue while at the same time disparaging their opponents. It works like this: I maintain that the black student insurgents at Cornell were guilty of criminal intimidation. Dr. de Zengotita fastens onto the epithet "black" and thinks "South Africa." Then, instead of answering my charge, he inserts words like "Sharpeville" and "police action" into his response, simultaneously advertising his "correct" political sentiments on the subject and insinuating that I am insensitive to racial violence in South Africa. It is quite simple, really—and utterly beside the point.

The sobering moral of all this—of Dr. Moretti's performance at Columbia no less than his colleague's self-righteous epistle—is how thoroughly a Sixties-style radicalism has managed to install itself in our educational institutions. In 1969, Drs. Moretti and de Zengotita—if they were old enough—would no doubt have been out on the ramparts protesting and subverting; now, like so many of their brethren in the university, they are free to push their radical vision from within, safely established in positions of power and influence. American campuses are no longer the scene of massive student unrest; yet this

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means not that the goals and the liberationist ethos of the Sixties have been abandoned, but merely that they are now firmly entrenched and have as it were received tenure.

The response to my essay from Dr. Moretti's friends has been most instructive. (While Dr. de Zengotita's letter was the only one received for publication, it was not the only letter from Dr. Moretti's supporters occasioned by my essay.) Predictably, there was considerable outrage and gnashing of teeth: my criticism of Dr. Moretti was dismissed as reactionary, of course, but I was also given to understand that it was simplistic, obtuse, unfair, inappropriate, defamatory, and so on. Curiously enough, though, while there was much indignation and complaining that I had got it all wrong, there was not a single challenge to the factual content of my essay. Unable to deny that Dr. Moretti had said what he in fact did say that evening, his partisans fell back on reviling me for . . . well, for critically reporting what actually happened.

One thing that particularly incensed Dr. Moretti's fan club was my identifying him as the assistant headmaster of the Dalton School, as if his professional affiliation were irrelevant to the discussion. But far from being irrelevant, Dr. Moretti's radical views about education made his position as a chief curricular policymaker for one of New York's elite schools the very *raison d'être* of my essay. Accordingly, I concluded my observations by asking what it meant that a man of Dr. Moretti's views should be entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the educational lives of some of our brightest and most privileged high school students. What, I wondered, did his fellow teachers, or his students' parents, or his Board of Trustees think of his description of the uprising at Cornell as a "hermeneutical act"? Was this the sort of "interpretation" that he encourages at the Dalton School? Dr. Moretti's friends have provided all manner of fulminating obfuscations to my queries. I still have not received an answer.

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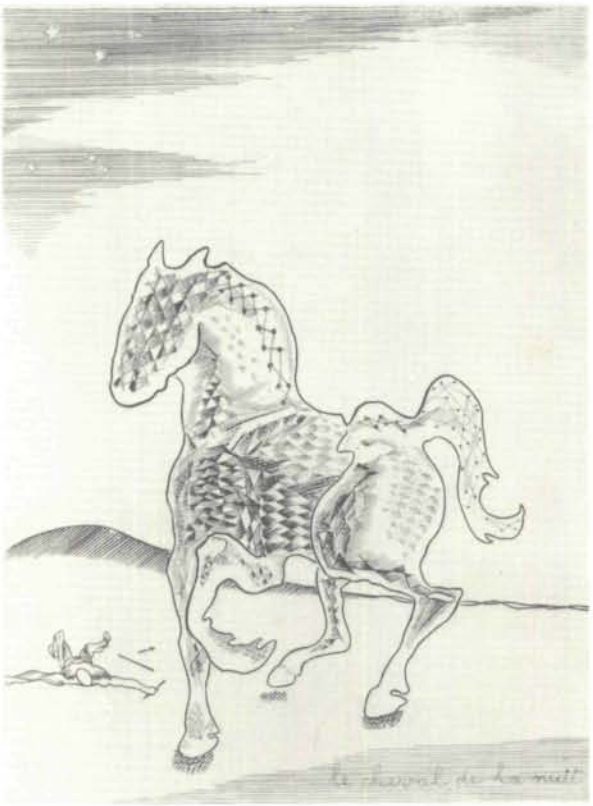

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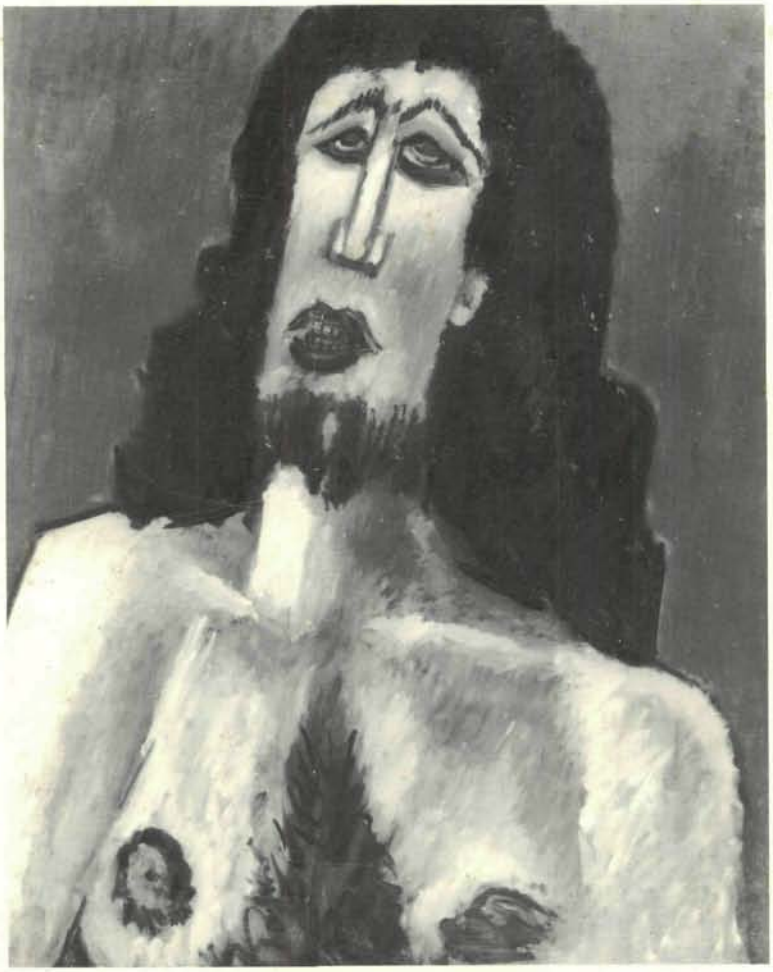

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